真・天地無用！ 魎皇鬼外伝

天地無用！ GXP4

梶島正樹

富士見ファンタジア文庫

イラスト 梶島正樹

SHIN TENCHI MUYO! RYO-OHKI GAIDEN
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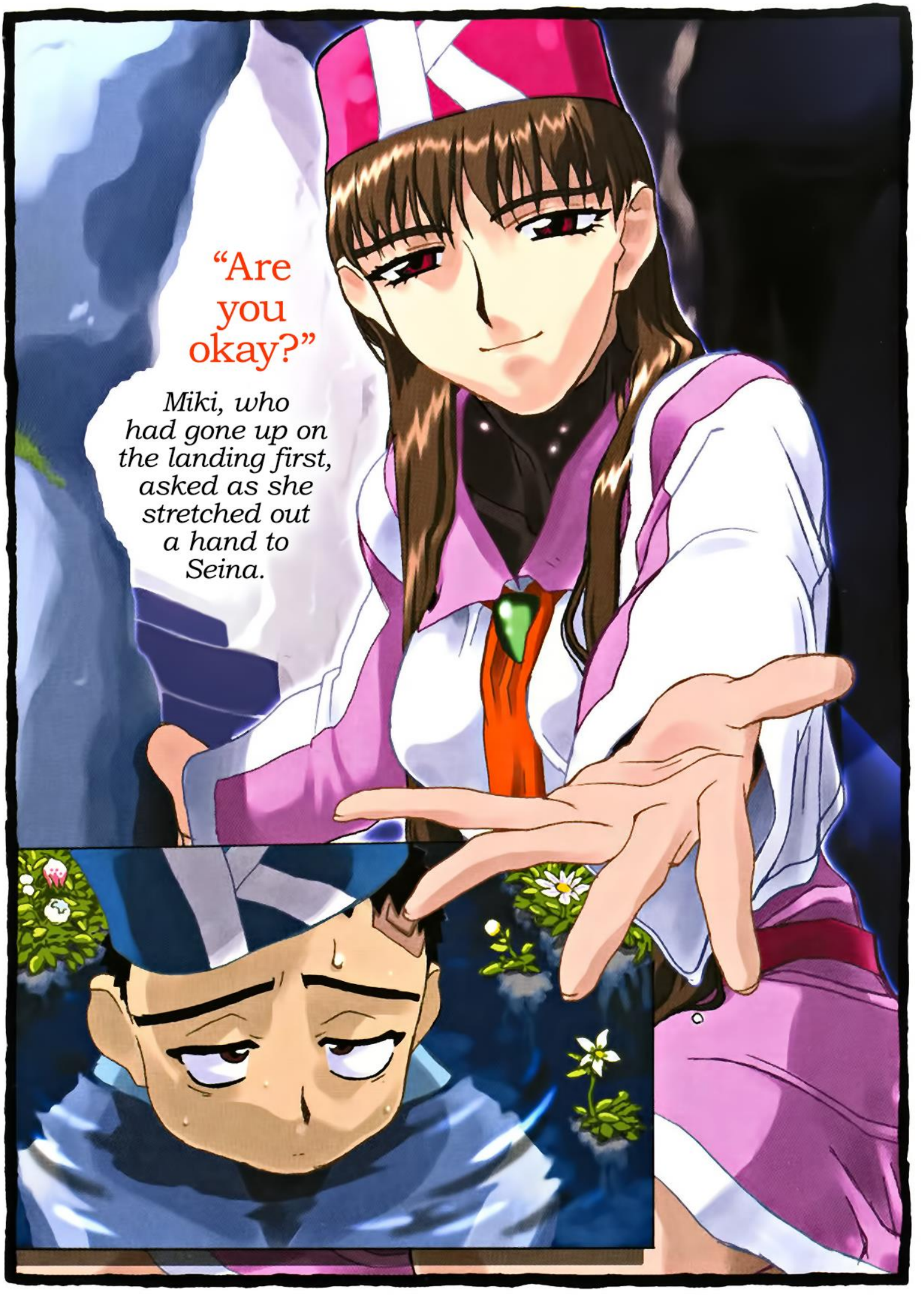
天地無用! GXP 4
TENCHI MUYO! GXP 4
"If it was going to become this busy, maybe we should have said that we had computer trouble as well?"
Airi complained as she wore the skin-tight cleansuit. She was checking the special-order lunches that were in layered, lacquered boxes.

"Welcome back, Master."
Seina and the others got off of the cruiser and were politely greeted by Hakuren, Gyokuren, Karen, and Suiren who wore simple and classic maid outfits.
"...I knew it."
Kiriko held her head and sunk to the floor.


"Are you okay?"
Miki, who had gone up on the landing first, asked as she stretched out a hand to Seina.

Shin Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki Gaiden

Tenchi Muyo! GXP4

Kajishima Masaki

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Chapter One: Ringo's Gratitude

The Outer Ring of Galaxy Academy—— This colossal structure, large enough to contain the entire Solar system within its inner space, was where ordinary humans could access the cutting-edge technologies researched at Galaxy Academy. Furthermore, it housed the headquarters of the Galactic Federation and the Galaxy Police (GP), making it the very center of technology, logistics, economy, and politics. Consequently, the outer ring attracted numerous companies and people from across the galaxy. Despite its immense size, chronic space shortages meant the ring was constantly being expanded.

The pace accelerated every year.

“Will it eventually become a perfectly spherical structure?”

Recently, however, this joke has become much more realistic due to improvements in public safety and economic revitalization caused by the mass arrests of pirates and criminals by Seina, and it had even become a betting subject at MMD, the Academy's largest bookmaker.

Those who gathered in the outer ring were not the only ones who directly benefited from the technology and logistics concentrated in the Academy.

“From diapers to the grave.”

As long as people and machines worked there, there would be many secondary needs, which was why the number of people moving there was exploding.

The Academy was a place of many opportunities, but not everyone could benefit from it - success came hand in hand with failure.

In addition to the large spaceports used by the GP and large corporations, the outer ring also had many smaller ports used by small companies and individuals, and they were just as busy with passengers as the larger ports. And with such a large concentration of people, it was only natural that the surrounding area would attract a large number of lodgings, shops, and entertainment businesses catering to the crew and passengers of the ships that came into port. However, the outer ring was short on land, so land prices were high. In an effort to cut costs even a little, small ports out of the GP's reach were using simple blocks made by connecting and modifying old large shipping containers that had been sold off by the GP as commercial multi-purpose stations.

However, many of these areas were filled with people whose dreams had been shattered, and had turned into slums.

(It was a good decision not to bring her…)

The place where Tatsuki Ringo was walking now was one of those slums.

The dwellings were assembled from various discarded parts, filled with tons of garbage, a

pungent stench, and residents with eyes like dead fish… It was definitely not a place an ordinary woman, or any outsider for that matter, could walk alone in. In fact, in the shadows of the buildings and scrap metal facing the path Ringo was walking, countless residents had gathered, ready to attack any prey that had entered their territory.

However, most of the gathered residents were overwhelmed by Ringo's elegance and royal dignity, and could only stare blankly, as if paralyzed. When she passed by, the residents' reactions, released from their paralysis, were divided into three groups: those who realized her true Nature and ran away, those who collapsed in satisfaction, and more than half who could not give up and chased after her.

Ringo's walking style may have looked normal, but in reality, her speed changed subtly and randomly. Those chasing her and running alongside her were thrown off balance by her speed changes, causing them to miss the chance to attack. This walking style could also be used to identify pursuers and snipers.

“No snipers… The route was probably chosen just to annoy me. But…” Ringo murmured with a sigh.

She had sensed the intent of dozens of residents who had persistently pursued her, now preparing to attack all at once.

“If it were Seto-sama…”

Seto, with her overwhelming presence alone, would likely crush their will to attack before they even tried. The same applied to her walking speed. Even on flat ground, she could easily disrupt an opponent's pace, trip them up, and make them fall. Or she could pass by completely unnoticed.

Ringo stopped, put on an intimidating look, and glanced quickly in the direction where the residents were hiding.

—Clack clack!

When the residents realized that the woman standing there was an incredible monster, their faces twisted in fear, or they let out terrible screams and fled like rabbits.

“……Haa” Ringo sighed heavily as she watched.

She herself didn't like this method and found it vulgar. Above all, being the cause of someone fleeing in terror wasn't exactly a pleasant situation for a young woman. And the receding screams especially wounded Ringo's heart.

“You don't have to be so scared…” Ringo pouted slightly.

However, even so, it would be troublesome if they attacked her. She had no intention of causing unnecessary bloodshed, and it would be inconvenient for her to have bad rumors spread about her in the future.

“…I still have a long way to go.”

Ringo looked back with a sullen expression and gazed up at her destination, a building with a main pillar that reached all the way to the ceiling of the container.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!”

In an office with a nameplate reading “President's Office”, a middle-aged man was banging on his desk and groaning softly.

The room was filled with tasteful furnishings, and the interior was neat and tidy, something you would never imagine would happen in a slum. The man who owned the room also exuded refinement, and it was strange that he had an office in a place like this.

The man's name was Ian Northern - he was the ruler of the containers in this area.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Ian had never felt so frustrated in his life. Though he was one of the successful people, he wasn't even at the bottom of the Academy's ruling class. So, being burned at work was a daily occurrence. This man was groaning in frustration in front of his subordinates.

“P-President… it's almost time…”

Of the two men standing across the desk, a thin, timid-looking man who appeared to be a secretary spoke timidly.

“Using the connections and connections I've worked so hard to build over the years, I was the first to get word that Widow had been captured!” Ian said, interrupting the secretary.

“Y-yes sir.”

“And that's not all! I also managed to get a copy of the report she submitted to the GP! It was truly a miracle.” Ian glared at the plate in his hand.

“Yes. And… that junk…” The secretary added sadly.

“That's it! That thing I thought wouldn't make much money… that thing!”

It was a job handled by a low-level department within the company he ran.

The death of a common playboy who squandered all his money. The family then asked him to sort through the personal belongings he left behind - that was all.

Inside the large container that the man owned were found a huge quantity of frozen sperm and egg samples from people of all races, ethnicities and regions.

According to the owner's notes, the items were collected for medical research, the data was collected and stored for a certain period of time, and then after the owner's death, the statute of limitations for confidentiality expired and the items were discarded - in other

words, they were smuggled goods.

“I don't know what the guy who collected these was thinking, and I don't want to know…”

Since there was no general demand for it and it had no academic value, it was practically trash that would cost money to dispose of.

“But that was… the key that unlocked the door to the treasure.”

Among the seemingly unremarkable frozen sperm and eggs were some from Widow's victims.

Widow's report, together with the key, became not easy money but glue-covered cotton on hands, or, no, millimeter-sized bearings in an electromagnet in a scrapyard… It was like a large amount of cash that had been thrown away, knowing that the owner would never find it - it became a map to treasure island.

“If they were to fertilize the eggs before Widow's arrest and the publication of the report, the embryos would be considered orphans. There would be some complications, but this is the Academy. Such questionable experiments are commonplace. Given that the Widow report has resulted in almost no surviving victims or relatives being recognized, there's a good chance that a huge amount of compensation will be awarded… and even if that doesn't work…”

Even the minimum amount of compensation allowed by convention would be enough to cover the annual revenue of Ian's company for over a decade, given Widow's astronomical assets.

That once-in-a-lifetime stroke of luck—even that phrase felt too mild—an astronomical fortune was about to vanish into thin air.

“President, why don't you just leave it to the cleaning department as usual?” The other bodyguard, a muscular man who had been listening silently until then, said.

“Do you know who you're talking about?”

“Huh? Ah…no.”

As the bodyguard flinched as Ian glared at him, a video of Ringo walking down a slum street appeared on the screen.

“Huh?” The bodyguard stared at the footage with a look of amazement on his face.

People came to Ian's office via two routes: a special, secure route for his clients, and the slum route for uninvited visitors. Those who took the slum route usually arrived in specially equipped cars with bodyguards for security. It was unheard of for someone to walk there alone, let alone a young woman dressed in such wealthy-looking clothes.

“…… Juraian clothing?”

However, the bodyguard noticed the distinctive clothing Ringo was wearing and looked at the secretary.

“Tatsuki Ringo Jurai……of the Imperial family.”

“The Imperial family!?”

The bodyguard's face changed color as soon as he heard what the secretary said.

“And she's the accountant for the infamous Demon Princess of Jurai.”

“The Demon Princess' Hyena Corps… Ah!”

The bodyguard must have been very surprised, as he reflexively covered his mouth when he saw Ringo on the monitor.

“Don't panic, she can't hear you… but don't say that in front of her.”

“R-right.”

Realizing his own panic, the bodyguard blushed and straightened up. Seeing this, Ian leaned back in his chair with a wry smile. It wasn't that Ian found the bodyguard's behavior strange; it reminded him of how he had looked when the secretary had notified him of Ringo's appointment. But it helped Ian sort out his feelings.

“No matter what you do, it's useless against an opponent who is on a different level of power and violence” - in other words, he gave up.

“But President, the Imperial Family coming alone… is that for real?”

“From the appointment request process, there's no doubt that this is the real Tatsuki Ringo-sama.” The secretary added matter-of-factly.

“It's been a long time since the end of the last war, so it seems like the younger generation doesn't know much about it. Jurai is a country where almost all of the people are warriors… Rumor has it that the royal family, in particular, are monsters who have received special bio-enhancements. What's more, the Hyena Corps of “The Demon Princess of Jurai” is a department that handles a huge amount of illicit funds, a kind of top secret. It's not uncommon for greed to get the better of them and end up wiping out an entire organization, or even the entire country.”

“I'm also curious about Tatsuki-sama's ship waiting outside. If it's from the Imperial Family, it's unlikely to be an 'Imperial Ship'…”

“That's just the official word. Either way, what's inside must be a monster, just like that customer.”

“But President, what is the purpose of The Demon Princess' Hyena Corps visit? Naturally, I assume it's about Widow's report… If that's the case, wouldn't the GP be there too…?” Once Ian calmed down, the secretary voiced his concern.

“Isn't it surprising that Jurai wants to obtain the Widow Report? The Academy and the GP were originally based on the Imperial Academy and the Kuramitsu family's private army, which were donated by Jurai and Seniwa. The old hostile feelings remain deeply rooted.”

“So Jurai has not yet received the contents of the Widow report?”

“They might not know.”

“But… if that happens, then we…”

“If they were serious, we wouldn't be here today. Well, maybe they don't want to cause any trouble at the Academy… but it's probably not a “silencing” thing, it's a “keep your mouth shut” thing.”

“Sha, sha, boss!”

The receptionist's voice came over the intercom, sounding strangely excited and high-pitched, and the image of the receptionist, flushed and sweating with nervousness, was displayed on the reception screen.

“Tatsuki-sama has arrived.”

“Okay. Send her in right away.”

Feeling uneasy about the receptionist's behavior, Ian shifted his focus to the impending confrontation with the Jurai Imperial Family. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

Just before Ringo arrived at Ian's company, they had been standing in the very spot where Ringo was now walking.

On a small stove made from a small can filled with suspicious used oil, steam rose from a suspicious soup, the contents of which were also unclear. Sitting there staring at the soup were three filthy, dirty men.

“Huh… why are we doing something like this in a place like this?”

The man who looked up with a sad expression was Barry, the operator of the ship that had brought Seina from Earth.

“Just a short time ago, I was enjoying dinner in a luxurious suite with a sumptuous menu.” Cohen said, crying at the meager food before him.

“There's no point in longing for the past, right?” Alan muttered with a bored look on his face as he stirred the soup, then carefully poured the boiling soup into three cups.

“Okay! Then let's eat.”

Just as Alan was about to reach for one of the cups,

“Wait a minute!” Barry held his hand up.

“Hey Alan…let me check that cup of soup.”

“What do you mean, check…”

“Don't play dumb. You think I wouldn't notice that you sneaked a single piece of meat into your cup?”

“ ! ”

Alan's face showed a slight look of agitation.

“You're such a stingy guy. It's because of you that the people in the fan club rebelled against you.”

“It's not my fault! Barry always had the most luxurious meals at the best restaurants!”

“The meals were just for the entertainment of the other fan club members… But Barry was buying all kinds of anime, movie and game goods and clothes, and he couldn't get enough of it, so he was also buying them at auctions for ridiculously high prices!”

“Those were materials for planning fan club merchandise… And besides, Alan exploited the club members for his own personal gain, and even used the membership fees to hire female staff members and tried to create a harem! And I know he was secretly embezzling and hoarding the funds!”

“Well, I was just creating a pool of money in case of an emergency!”

—Clang!

The three of them were arguing… Or rather, they were so engrossed in their mutual insults that they ended up tipping over the small table, causing the soup cups to plummet to the ground, where they were absorbed into the fine debris on the ground.

“AAAAAAAAAA!”

With a scream, the three picked up the cups that had fallen to the ground, but there was not a drop of soup left in them. All that was left was the tiny piece of meat, less than a centimeter in size, that Alan had tried to keep all to himself.

“ ! ”

Before the three of them could reach out at the same time, a small, rat-like animal grabbed the piece of meat and quickly disappeared into a nearby crevice.

“Th-That's not possible…”

The three of them collapsed in disappointment, but then noticed a strange excitement all around them. Five minutes later, they saw Ringo from behind the junk.

“…Those are… Juraian clothes.” Alan was hiding in the junk and staring at Ringo through a small gap.

“And she seems to be a very wealthy woman.”

“She's beautiful.”

“I see, no wonder the people here have changed the color of their eyes. It's just like moths swarming around the light.” Alan's mouth curved into a slight smile.

“Hey Alan… are you planning to attack that person…?”

“I-isn't that dangerous?”

Despite their difficulties, Barry and Cohen still had some sense.

“This isn't about the fan club guys. If you make Jurai your enemy…”

“Calm down. Who said anything about attacking her?” Alan looked at them with a broad smile, his tone gentle but with a hint of contempt for them.

“…What are you thinking?” Barry asked confused, knowing the meaning behind Alan's expression.

“How many times have I gotten hurt because of that look on Alan's face…”

“Hey, think about it. We are acquaintances of the Jurai royal family, Masaki Minaho Jurai-sama… No, we are acquaintances of Seto-sama. In fact, our actions even saved Jurai from crisis.”

Alan's bad habit was to overestimate himself, and Barry and Cohen's bad habit was to easily fall for his words and agree with them.

“I see, you're right.”

“We're Jurai's benefactors! If we tell her, she'll get us out of here.”

“Hey, we're the benefactors of the Demon Princess of Jurai, who is said to be the most powerful person in Jurai. We'll be welcomed as heroes to Jurai.”

Poverty dulls the soul - the evil group mentality of these three men made them forget to learn from their past mistakes and let their self-inflated opinions run wild. And so their elated mood reached its peak.

“Let's show these insects that the light they seek will bow down before us. Haa~ haahaha!”

The excitement they felt as they imagined Ringo bowing down before them and welcoming them, or the hospitality that would follow, had dulled their sense of caution to an absolute minimum.

“Let's go on a new path of glory!”

“Ooh!”

Alan and the other two puffed their chests out and walked out from behind the junkyard towards Ringo. And then…

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

It was like an encounter with a large carnivorous beast breaking into your bedroom. The fear of a force that brought absolute violence and death suddenly invading a place where you were protected by the shell of your home, a place where you could rest your body and mind.

GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

The three of them were hit hard by Ringo's intimidating energy, and without any shame or dignity, they screamed at the top of their lungs and fled like rabbits. They fled the container town, and three hours later they were captured by the fan club members.

“I'll bring you some tea right away.”

The female employee who guided Ringo bowed slowly and looked at Ringo with a reluctant look on her face before leaving. Ian, who normally disliked such lazy behavior, was captivated by Ringo's aura when he saw her in person.

“…Oh, thank you for your hard work.” He murmured, absentmindedly.

The moment the female employee showed Tatsuki Ringo into the room, the atmosphere changed completely. Her overwhelming energy, like sunlight shining into the darkness of the underground, blew away the stagnant air in the room and purified it.

“……”

Not only Ian, but his secretary and bodyguard all felt as if they had been thrown out of a foul-smelling, claustrophobic sewer into a refreshing, green forest.

The Ringo standing before him was not the image of the “Hyena Corps, “ but rather a sweet forest spirit. Of course, Ian had also interacted with members of the upper class, and had even seen royalty and nobility at parties a few times. But the woman before him had a comforting quality and an overwhelming presence that they lacked. Especially after the considerable pressure he had been under.

(…This is the real thing…Ugh, no!)

The three of them were stunned by Ringo's demeanor, but Ian was the first to regain his senses.

“W-well, please… this way.”

Ian realized that Ringo was still standing and quickly led her over to the sofa.

Ian's words seemed to free them from their spell, and the secretary looked at the documents he had received, while the bodyguard paid close attention to Ringo's every move.

“Ugh!”

As the bodyguard watched Ringo casually walk to the sofa, a chill ran down his spine. His training had allowed him to sense the power inherent in Ringo from her smallest gestures and the way she walked. The bodyguard felt a suffocating pressure, as if he were facing an enormous, wild beast. He was overcome with the urge to flee the room, but his pride in his job kept him still. But his eyes were constantly trained on the door, the only escape route.

While the bodyguard was filled with fear, the secretary standing next to him was also trembling slightly as he looked at the document plate.

“Mr. President!”

The pleasant atmosphere was disrupted when the secretary rushed over, and Ian took the plate of documents with a frown.

“… This is!”

Ian glanced over the documents his secretary had given him and looked at Ringo in surprise.

“Time is money…especially in this case, I think?”

Hearing Ringo's calm words, Ian looked down at the document again to confirm its contents.

There, clearly stated, was the demand for the transfer of the genetic material. Moreover, Ringo's side had thoughtfully attached their own estimate for the disposal costs. It was nearly identical to the estimate Ian's company had calculated for the genetic material… No, it was even more precise and comprehensive, a top-tier report worthy of a major corporation or a nation-state. To put the impression in perspective, it was like being shown a child's scribble and then a masterpiece.

(I see… So it wasn't about the Widow report

after all. They came to snatch this instead… Damn, what an incredible nose. I can understand going after a report, but to notice something as trivial as our company's minor operations… “The Hyena Corps”… I see.)

Ian felt as though he had caught a glimpse of the true terror of the name “The Demon Princess of Jurai.” However, Ringo's demeanor was calm and not the least bit intimidating. So Ian's thoughts shifted to business.

(Now that they know my hand so well, there's no point in trying to negotiate. Besides, it's obvious from the panic my secretary and I are feeling that the numbers are accurate… Well, once they find out that the report was leaked, it's nothing more than garbage.)

Furthermore, if negotiations dragged on too long and the Widow report was officially released, the same result would occur.

(Hmm…)

The rest of the document included a request for the transfer of all genetic material and related documents, as well as an investigation and negotiation with any future victims who could come forward, along with an estimated cost.

(Well, it's a fair price… but…)

The genetic material was practically worthless. As for the victims' claims, judging from both the Widow report and the official complaints, it was clear there was absolutely no one eligible to receive compensation. The only cases worth pursuing would be petty fraud or, at best, objections from the family of that guy who had the frozen sperm collection. For that level of work, the price wasn't bad.

(…But compared to the amount of money Jurai will receive, it's a tiny fraction of it. Even Jurai wouldn't want the report to be known. So… how much can we get out of the Widow report…?)

Ian's desire began to grow as he felt the softness around Ringo, and as he thought this, he glanced at Ringo's expression.

—Time is money.

However, Ian remembered what Ringo had said earlier and quickly dismissed the idea.

(No, no. The golden rule in this kind of deal is to avoid unnecessary greed. Even if I were to complain and ask for a little more, it would only get me so much, and besides, she is the Demon Princess… No, she is the accounting department head of Kamiki Seto Jurai. Poor negotiations would be a waste of time and my life. Having a connection with the Imperial Family of the Emperor of Jurai is far more valuable.)

Having come to this conclusion, Ian took another quick look at the contract.

“I understand. This is an ideal deal for us.”

When Ian said this, the secretary standing next to him cried out in surprise. “Mr. President!”

The secretary, like Ian moments before, had likely expected to extract more money. But Ian raised his hand smoothly, silencing him.

“S-Sorry…”

The secretary jumped back a step. Seeing this, Ringo smiled warmly and said, “Well then, without further ado, I'd like to request the delivery of the goods.”

As Ringo spoke, a ringtone began to sound from Ian's desk.

“Excuse me.”

A small ring-shaped audio monitor activated smoothly beside Ian's ear.

“It's me… The Jurai ship? I see. Fine, hand it over immediately.”

After conveying only that much concisely and cutting the communication, Ian politely handed the Widow report to Ringo.

“Thank you for your prompt response.”

Ringo accepted it, stood up smoothly, and extended her hand to Ian for a handshake, sealing the contract. Ian reflexively stood up and shook the offered hand.

“Damn it!”

Perhaps due to his unusual nervousness, he'd forgotten to wipe the sweat from his palm. Ringo, however, showed no sign of noticing and squeezed Ian's hand back.

“Well then, I'll take my leave.” Ringo began to walk away, then added, “Oh, right. I almost forgot.”

She pulled a plate mail from her pocket and handed it to Ian.

“I hope we can continue to be friends in the future.”

Just as Ringo gave a small bow and headed toward the door, a female employee, different from the one who had guided Ringo earlier, burst in with a flushed face and her hair and clothes slightly disheveled.

“Excuse me…!”

However, when the female employee noticed that Ringo was right in front of her, she froze up and was unable to move.

To put it in a metaphor, it was like having a sudden encounter with your idol. Normally, if they could scream, they would regain some composure, but their sense of work as an employee would not allow her to do so.

“Tea, tea…”

As a result, she was left standing there, red in the face and sweating profusely, like a toad trapped in a mirrored box.

“Hey, the customer is leaving. Forget about the tea.”

The secretary hurried over to the female employee and stepped between them, as if to hide something dirty from Ringo.

“Goodness, why did it take you so long?”

“I-I'm sorry.”

Seeing the female employee blush and hang her head, Ringo hid her mouth with her sleeve and gave a chuckled softly.

An ordinary person would never have the opportunity to meet a member of the Imperial Family. This was a chance to see such a noble figure, someone even rarer than a top idol. Outside the door, a huge battle had probably occurred over who would bring the tea.

“Thank you. I'm in a hurry today, but if there's another chance, I'll treat you.”

Ringo smiled brightly at the female staff member and was escorted out by the secretary.

“Um… President, are you okay?”

After seeing her off, the secretary returned to the room and addressed Ian, who stood frozen in place, staring blankly at his own hands.

“Hm? Oh, it’s nothing.”

What surprised Ian wasn't that Ringo had taken his sweaty hand without hesitation, but that her hand—which looked distinctly feminine and soft at first glance—was a “working” hand, unlike that of a woman of privilege. Ian recognized the feel of that hand.

“…My father and mother's hands.”

Like many other young people, Ian had left his hometown because he hated hardship. He came to the Academy seeking opportunities and success. It was a common story in places where people gathered.

(Hands that I used to hate.)

However, before he knew it, his hands had become the same.

He was glad that he had not been beaten by a young girl who knew nothing of hardship and wielded power over him.

“Um… President, are you truly satisfied with those terms?”

Ignoring the secretary who began speaking with a slightly dissatisfied expression, Ian opened the plate mail Ringo had handed him.

“…While it's true our hand was known, wasn't there a bit more room for negotiation…? Yes, that's what I think…?”

“Heh… Heh heh… Hahahaha!”

“S-Sir! I was thinking of the company's best interests…”

Feeling brushed off, the secretary glared at Ian with a sour expression. Ian silently shoved the plate mail into his hands.

“?!…W-What is this?!”

The secretary froze, expression unchanged, upon seeing the plate mail.

“What an incredible reward. I could never match that.”

Ian pulled the plate mail from the secretary's frozen hands and stared at it with a slightly puzzled expression.

“Um… what exactly is that…?” The bodyguard asked, looking at the secretary curiously.

“This is… a letter of recommendation to the MMD Foundation.”

“The MMD Foundation?”

“It was originally established to manage patent royalties for Philosophers. You've probably heard the story, right? It's said that the patents held by those Philosophers account for as much as 30% of all patent registrations within the Galactic Federation. Philosophers not only spend a lot of money on research, but the money they bring in is even more incredible. For a mid-sized bank operating on a planetary scale, the financial situation can be affected by whether or not it has a contract with a single Philosopher. And when it comes to the legendary Philosopher, Hakubi Washu, her assets alone could turn a mid-sized bank into a mega bank. Naturally, every bank would be scrambling like mad to court her business.”

“That… sounds terrifying.”

“…And the intensifying competition became a problem, leading to the creation of a foundation to manage them all. Well, it was an inevitable conclusion.”

“Haa …… So what are you going to do with the money you raise? Stocks or investments…”

“That would defeat the purpose of establishing the foundation. Investments are restricted to within the Academy, and the scholars' recommendations determine how funds are allocated for Academy scholarship endowments and student research grants.”

“Okay… but what does that have to do with this letter of recommendation?”

“What nonsense are you spouting?!” The secretary, finally snapping back to his senses, suddenly interrupted. “If a Philosopher's recommendation is required, it means it's something a Philosopher has approved.”

“I hear there were plenty of strange, highly personal things too.”

“That's irrelevant! Even if it was only a fraction, those research results later generated enormous profits. Many Academy scholarship recipients went on to become corporate executives or government officials after graduation, showcasing their exceptional abilities!”

“Maybe the scope of aid has expanded to include the general public…?”

“Hmph… You're starting to understand a little. However, it's a super-mega bank with the potential to crush existing banks… To get a loan, you have to become a member. And you need a recommendation from another member.”

“But… do we even have a business worthy of their approval?”

It was a half-joking, offhand remark from the bodyguard. Yet it was enough to put the brakes on Ian's high spirits.

“More important than whether they offer loans is the fact that you're an MMD member. Just being a member means you can do business with any major corporation.”

But the secretary was ecstatic over this sudden stroke of luck.

“That's incredible!”

“MMD's credibility is immense, after all.”

In stark contrast to the two of them, Ian's high spirits steadily cooled. Regaining his composure, he noticed his reflection in the window as dusk fell.

(Credibility… huh?)

The Imperial Family of Jurai—no, having seen the real Tatsuki Ringo and shaken her hand, the figure reflected there now seemed pitifully shabby. The same could be said for the two people frolicking near Ian.

“Let's proceed with the membership registration right away. That way, our company can instantly join the ranks of top-tier enterprises… Wh-what's wrong?”

The secretary noticed Ian's wry smile and looked at him suspiciously.

(Blending in among the real deal like this feels utterly out of place.)

Of course, he wasn't referring to the secretary, but to himself.

—I hope we can get together.

—If there is another opportunity.

Suddenly, Ian remembered the words Ringo had casually said to him and the female employee earlier. Turning those words around, they meant, “We can't do this the way things are now.” He thought he'd cleared that up with the Widow report. He thought they could continue to do business with Jurai…

(I see!)

Ian looked at the letter of recommendation in his hand.

(The recommendation letter is only for passing the membership screening. It doesn't guarantee that you will be admitted…)

Ian couldn't imagine that he would be able to join MMD in his current state.

(If that's the case, then why did she give me a letter of recommendation? For someone of her caliber to recommend someone who can't join… It's like I'm being tested… Ah!)

It was then that Ian noticed another treasure Ringo had left behind.

“…Stop.”

“Huh?”

“This one's on hold for now.”

With that, Ian tossed the recommendation letter into the shredder.

“Wh-w-what are you doing?!”

He grabbed the secretary by the collar as he rushed to the shredder in a panic.

“Forget that, let’s talk business! The quote she brought is a goldmine. See if you can approach some of the distributors she listed! Just like that collection, there must be items we can reuse.”

Ian was elated as he was sure he had gotten the answer right on Ringo's test.

“Welcome back, Princess. It seems the item in question has arrived at the designated location.”

As Ringo emerged from the transporter pod on her ship, the Honoka, her elderly butler, Tōdō, greeted her and helped her to take her jacket off.

“Yes, thank you for your efforts. Everything is proceeding as planned.”

“That is most fortunate. But such a company could have been dealt with in any manner… And yet you went out of your way to handle it personally…”

“If it were part of my duties as an accounting department employee for Seto-sama, I would have done so.”

With that, she turned abruptly, fixing Tōdōu with a resolute expression.

“Tōdō. The expenses incurred in the previous operation were enormous, yet the loss rate was near zero, and the mission success rate far exceeded expectations… The cost-effectiveness was nothing short of miraculous. But that's not all. The immense profits that operation generated brought tremendous benefits not only to Jurai but also to the Galactic Federation. The fact that we could designate sixty percent of the war funds originally earmarked for the operation, plus the entire bounty from capturing the pirates, as surplus confidential funds means that unless some extraordinary emergency occurs, it's practically equivalent to solving our future operational funding issues.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“At that time, since Jurai carried out the direct capture, concealing the reward for Seina-sama was possible. But this time, the circumstances are different. Widow's assets were already anticipated to be an astronomical sum, and the publicly offered bounties and rewards for her capture were also enormous. Once Widow's arrest is announced and the trial begins, the Widow Report will become the sole, absolute piece of evidence. And she will not retract her testimony that she was captured by Yamada Seina… Given that, no matter how much we try to conceal it, it's easy to imagine where those vast assets will end up.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't think that through.”

If Ian learned that the enormous amount of reward money was going to Seina, even if Jurai directly obstructed it, his resentment was highly likely to shift toward the far weaker position of Seina. Of course, it would also arouse the jealousy of others.

“Yamada Seina-sama is particularly prone to skewed odds. Even if it means some financial loss, we must avoid any harm coming to him at all costs. Recognize this fact thoroughly once more.”

“Understood. But is it really okay with this particular person?”

At Tōdō's question, Ringo flashed a bright smile.

“The response to the recommendation letter has vanished. It seems they're smarter than expected. If it had been someone motivated by money, we would have ended up paying a rather high price for the Widow Report.”

“And then they'd become a scapegoat for Seina-sama… is that correct?”

If a small company managed to maneuver well and snag a chunk of that massive reward, the greedy ones would likely swarm them instead of Seina, protected by Jurai and the Academy. That should cool the temporary frenzy, and it would be easier to break through Seina's guard if it was spread thin.

“Given the situation, they should clear the way nicely. They might even prove useful to Seina-sama in the future. More importantly, what's the status of investigating the report's source?”

“Yes, that has been transferred to Mikami-sama's Intelligence Division.”

(That report wasn't the version submitted to the Criminal Division, but nearly the original… What on earth? …No, since Mikami-sama is handling the investigation now, there's no point in me prying.)

Ringo had urgent work to attend to.

“…Then I'll leave the rest to them.”

“Still, if it weren't for that one piece of testimony, you wouldn't have had to go through all this trouble…”

A complaint slipped from Tōdō's lips. The reward negotiation for Seina, though approved by Seto, was ultimately a personal matter. Ringo had to juggle Seina's urgent work alongside her regular duties. As the chief of the accounting department, Ringo's workload was heavy even under normal circumstances. Tōdō was worried about Ringo as she had barely slept these past few days.

“That's true…”

Although she knew what Tōdō wanted to say, Ringo deliberately ignored him and recalled the time when she was present when Widow and Mikami met face to face.

“…Ugh”

Just that thought sent goosebumps across Ringo's skin. She shook her head frantically, trying to banish the memory, and forced herself to analyze Widow as calmly as possible.

Widow couldn't possibly have failed to grasp the meaning of half her enormous fortune going to a single person. That person's life would almost certainly be profoundly changed. And the many people who swarmed around them would face the same fate.

“…But even knowing that… no, knowing it, she deliberately gave that testimony…”

Widow's words were those of someone who wished to be with Seina.

“Those words were the most important words to Widow. Even if they could potentially ruin Seina-sama, she would never retract them.”

“Truly fitting of the name Widow, I suppose.”

“…Though, she didn't seem to be anticipating Seina-sama's ruin.”

“Goodness me, what a terrifying woman. That intuition of hers… it seems to be something beyond my imagination.”

“Indeed. That aspect of her personality resembles those like Seto-sama.”

“I myself have never met Yamada Seina-sama directly, but from what I've seen in video records, he appears to be nothing more than an ordinary boy…”

“Heh heh, that description might be accurate.”

“What could Seto-sama and Widow possibly see in such an ordinary boy?”

Of course, they certainly valued Seina's exceptionally high “probability bias” ability. But reflecting on what Tōdō had seen and heard so far, it was also clear that wasn't not the only criterion.

“Those like Seto-sama… individuals with particularly exceptional abilities, it seems, tend to value and respect people who possess even a single thing they themselves cannot match, or something they themselves lack, far more than we might imagine. Widow… described Seina-sama's purity as a weapon.”

“A weapon? A woman feared like the plague or the Grim Reaper called his purity a weapon… is that it…?”

“For people like her, it must be deadly poison.” Ringo said.

“AAAA

of that slum garbage dump had pushed her beyond her limits.

“Why didn't you take me with you to such a filthy, stinky, dangerous place?! Why, why, whyyyyy!?”

And once it exceeded her tolerance, she would descend into a state of confusion.

(That's why I didn't take you.)

But there was no way Nene could understand that now.

(I guess I have no choice. Sorry, Nene.)

Ringo sprayed a misty substance right under Nene's tear-streaked nose as she pleaded.

“Ahhh!”

Nene, who had been concentrating on her sense of smell, was shocked by the sudden citrus perfume that was sprayed on her. Tōdō took advantage of this opportunity to grab her from behind and drag her out of the room.

“…I guess it was a good decision not to take her.”

If Nene had been taken to a container slum, she would surely have become delirious from the stench and resorted to the outrageous act of burning everything.

“Not good. I need to hurry; she might shake off Tōdō and come back here.”

Ringo hurried to her own room. If Nene caught her again, her clothes would be incinerated. Her body would be scrubbed in the bathroom until her skin was raw, and then, with that same momentum, a massive ship wide cleanup involving all the staff would begin.

Entering her room, Ringo cut off her maid's greeting and said, “Nene is coming. Take care of the laundry and cleanup, then head straight to the next destination.”

With that, she quickly shed her clothes and dashed into the bathroom.

The maid smiled wryly as she gathered Ringo's clothes, rolled them up in the Juraian silk carpet lying on the floor, and carried them away.

After finishing her deodorizing routine, Ringo emerged from the shower pod and stretched her body fully as she soaked in the spacious open-air bath built on the elevated platform.

(Since I haven't heard anything from Tōdō, Nene must have come to her senses.) She thought as she raised her upper body and turned to look at the view.

Below lay a vast expanse of deep forests and grasslands, rivers and lakes, fields and pastures, and houses under construction. At the center, though considerably smaller compared to other Imperial Ships, a giant tree nearly a kilometer tall stood proudly

displaying its majestic presence. It was the typical garden layout constructed within an Imperial Ship.

“The space seems to have stabilized nicely.”

Ringo's ship, “Honoka”, was originally a fourth-generation ship, but after being modified by Washu, it had gained power rivaling that of a third-generation ship. And then…

“Ringo! Ringo! Mama’s here!”

A heart-shaped twin crystal appeared before Ringo, and Honoka's cheerful voice came from within it. She had developed a clear will by being given the same type of crystal core as Ryo-Ohki.

“Thank you, please connect me.”

Ringo smoothed her bathrobe and snapped to attention.

The next instant, “Thank you for your hard work, Ringo-dono. I've received the container.”

A monitor appeared in front of Ringo, showing Washu with a smiling face.

“Did you find what you were looking for in the shipment?”

“Well, standing around talking isn't very comfortable. Sit down, sit down. You'll catch a chill.”

Washu's monitor lowered itself closer to the water's surface.

“Thank you.”

Ringo slowly and gracefully stepped back into the hot spring, careful not to disturb the surface of the water.

“Mama, Ma~ma!”

Sensing the atmosphere had relaxed, Honoka, who had been perched on Ringo's shoulder, fluttered happily around the monitor displaying Washu. For Honoka, her true mother was a third-generation tree, but the Royal Trees didn't really have the concept of a mother. However, Washu had instilled in Honoka, whose will was just beginning to bud, the notion that she was the sister-goddess of Tsunami, the primordial Tree. That was why Honoka called her Mama.

“Honoka-chan has become much more emotionally stable.”

“Yes, it seems she's come to understand quite a bit of what we say lately… Hey, Honoka-chan. Washu-sama and I have something important to discuss, so could you step away for a little while?”

“Just for a little while?”

“Yes. If anything happens, come get me.”

“…Okay, understood.” Honoka said in a slightly dejected voice, but still left the room as Ringo had instructed.

“……Hmm. She's quite promising. Her emotional fluctuations are minimal too… Still, a fourth-generation class change isn't very realistic.”

“So the others aren't really…”

“Ah, we stopped the experiments on all of them… It's fine. There are absolutely no aftereffects for those kids.” Washu added gently when she noticed Ringo's worried expression and realized she was concerned about the other trees.

“I see. That's good.”

“In the end, it looks like Honoka-chan will be the only successful case. If we're going to enhance anyone, it'll have to be the third generation who already has their own will.”

“Noike-sama's Kyoko-sama, right?”

“She can handle actual combat now… Oh, we've gone off track. Right, right. I found the thing I was looking for in the packages. Wow~ Really, this is a huge help. You must have worked hard.”

“Not at all. It's an honor to be of service to Washu-sama.”

Ringo hadn't been told exactly what Washu was searching for. All she knew was that it was related to that infamous collection.

“Ugh… Collectors… Where do they even find such things?”

“Heh, Washu-sama saying that?”

—Because when it came to having strange tastes, Washu could be said to be at the very pinnacle.

“Heh heh heh, that's a compliment, a compliment. So, the payment goes to Ringo-dono's account, right?”

“No, please use the usual account at the MMD Foundation.”

The “usual account” Ringo referred to was the one serving as the secret funding source for Seto's operations. MMD's level of secrecy far exceeded national standards, and the assets it held were staggering. It could immediately provide any amount, no matter how large or urgent, upon a member's request, making it the perfect place to hide covert activity funds.

“I'll take care of it over there. This one is for Ringo-dono personally.”

“This time, it was purely incidental. Please don't give it another thought.”

Since she received formal compensation, any personal payment carried the implication of hush money. Accepting it would violate Ringo's pride. Of course, Washu harbored none of the intentions Ringo imagined; the payment was purely a gesture of goodwill. It was akin to giving a child pocket money. Precisely because of that, Ringo refused to accept it.

“The private work Ringo-dono is doing now… it's related to Seina-dono's reward, right? Even without meeting directly, it's not entirely unrelated to Seina-dono. Couldn't you let me cover at least part of the activity expenses as a token of that little help?”

“Understood. If you insist… In lieu of payment, would it be acceptable for me to ask Washu-sama a question?”

Washu, already legendary, was a god-like figure in knowledge not just within the Academy, but throughout the Galactic Federation. Being able to ask Washu a question was worth its weight in gold to Ringo.

“A question, huh… Well, you don't have to ask for it as payment, you know.”

“Private questions to Washu-sama are strictly forbidden by Seto-sama… Besides, consulting fees for a Philosopher are exorbitant, so that's not really an option, is it?”

“What nonsense are you talking about? It's free for friends.”

“! …Ah, thank you.”

Being called a friend by Washu made Ringo tremble with emotion.

“Besides, Ringo-chan, you've been handling all sorts of errands for me anyway.”

Washu was still officially listed as missing. Therefore, during operations, Seto's accounting department and some close aides handled her affairs. As the head of accounting, Ringo had interacted with Washu more than anyone else due to her position.

“Well, if it's something I can help with… But anyway, what did you want to ask?”

“Well, actually… it's something that's been discussed in the accounting department for a while now…”

“I see.”

“What does the 'MMD' in the MMD Foundation stand for?”

“Huh?” Washu, who had braced herself for whatever question might come, suddenly went limp.

“Since you were involved in its founding, Washu-sama, surely you know?”

(Oh dear… Even within the Imperial Family, Ringo-chan is still Juraian royalty, isn't she? This

peculiar sensibility must be common among royalty.)

“Um…”

“Heh heh heh. Now that's a rather peculiar question.”

“However, this turned into a huge controversy involving various departments. When I asked Seto-sama, she snapped, 'How the hell would I know?! I don't know! I don't know! I don't know!!' And when I asked the MMD Chairman…”

“I see…”

“If it's something inconvenient, you don't have to answer…” Even as she said this, Ringo's eyes shone like a puppy begging its owner to take it for a walk.

“That certainly is a question worthy of a reward… All right. But don't tell anyone! Otherwise you'll regret it.”

“Y-yes.”

Ringo had intended it to be a fairly casual question, but Washu's unexpected reaction made her tense.

“Very well.”

Washu nodded in satisfaction at Ringo's answer and let out a deep breath.

“So, where should I start? That's right! Ringo-dono, do you know who the first chairman of MMD was?”

“I believe it was a person named Ikuma-sama? He was also Washu-sama's teacher, correct?”

“Ah, you know your history well. He was my and Naja's mentor.”

“I've heard about him from Seto-sama too… And while he's not quite as legendary as Washu-sama and Naja-sama, he's the next… or rather, the next most famous person after them.”

Ringo hesitated because the next most famous after Washu and Naja was Clay.

“Hehehe… He didn't stand out much because he worked behind the scenes so much. Professor Ikuma is the reason Naja and I are where we are today…” Washu murmured with a nostalgic expression.

“You respected him, didn't you?”

“Yes. For Naja and me, Professor Ikuma was like a father. And MMD? That name was given by Naja, inspired by the very words that led to Professor Ikuma founding MMD.”

“Well, starting with something so important…”

Ringo felt a little moved, but immediately noticed something off about Washu's words.

“But if it was such an important phrase… especially the founding principle, why wasn't it made public? It seems like something they should have carved onto a big plaque at MMD headquarters and displayed…”

“Ahahahaha, a plaque… Kukuuku.” Washu laughed with a troubled, yet deeply meaningful expression.

Ringo watched her curiously, then asked, “Um… what exactly were those words?”

“Ahem. …Everyone Remember, Don't Waste Money!” (Minna Mudadzukai shicha Dameda zo) Washu closed her eyes and mimicked Ikuma in a loud voice.

“……”

A full five minutes passed—Ringo stared at Washu with a blank expression. She hadn't understood what that meant at first.

“Did you hear that, Ringo-chan?”

“Everyone… mustn't… waste money?” Ringo murmured, slowly chewing over Washu's words. She desperately tried to read some deep hidden meaning into them, but no matter how she thought about it, she could only grasp the literal meaning.

“There's no point in thinking too deeply about it. Just take the initials and you'll get MMD.”

“You're joking, right?”

“Seriously♡”

“Really?”

“Really, really. Heh heh heh, typical Naja stupid naming sense, huh?”

“This isn't just stupid… It must have been a joke from Naja-sama, right?”

“No, I'm serious!” Crossing her arms, she declared it flatly with a tone that left no room for argument.”

“Seriously…?”

“Yes, I'm serious.”

“Well, admittedly, looking at Akara Naja-sama's records, there are plenty of descriptions of strange incidents that seem to fit…”

Great figures were remembered only for their achievements and the paths they took to reach them. Their hidden daily lives, hobbies, and preferences rarely made it into the historical record. Even if they did, and even if they seemed strange by ordinary standards,

they tended to be treated favorably in light of their great deeds. But reading about it in records and hearing it directly from Washu were worlds apart in reality. **(TN: When Kajishima says “hobbies”, he usually means “fetishes”.)**

“But you know, while MMD might be a famous foundation now, it started out as just a private money management agency.”

“But it was a group that could sway a bank's financial standing.”

“The amount doesn't matter. To those philosophers back then, it was just like… well, having your mother manage your allowance, as Professor Ikuma said.”

(That astronomical sum being treated like a child's allowance… What a nuisance.)

Seeing Washu laugh heartily, Ringo understood where the Academy's traditional temperament originated. But the Academy was fundamentally a place where creation took absolute priority. To most philosophers, that creation merely generated enormous wealth as a secondary effect.

“But if what Washu-sama says is true, I still don't quite understand why we need to hide its origins?”

“Hmm… well, about that. Actually, when Professor Ikuma found out, he was furious. Furious! He suddenly grabbed Naja and gave her a good spanking… Oh, over her skirt, of course!” Washu quickly added when she noticed Ringo's stunned expression.

“Over her skirt, you say… Haa, that's incredible. Not just the act itself, but the fact that someone could do that to the legendary philosopher is astonishing.”

“Well, to Professor Ikuma, we were like his daughters, you see. But there's another reason this was kept secret. See, about that plaque Ringo-dono mentioned earlier…”

“Ah, yes. If it was the founding principles, then regardless of the exact wording, wouldn't it be acceptable to have it engraved on a plaque and displayed?”

“Exactly, that. Well, actually… Naja went and did it…”

“She did?”

“She tried to hold an unveiling ceremony for that plaque engraved with the words at the MMD founding meeting, behind Professor Ikuma's back… and then this time, her skirt got pulled down and she got spanked right on her bare bottom…”

“…Whoa…”

The sheer shock of the revelation made Ringo feel like she might faint.

(…Come to think of it, this feeling is the same as when Father showed me that video before…)

It had an impact comparable to when she saw the recorded footage of the “damn old hag” remark made during the parade when the current Emperor of Jurai, Masaki Azusa Jurai, accompanied by Seto, first arrived in Jurai.

(They say the whole country froze over back then… Is this what that felt like?)

“Well, Naja had already done all sorts of things before that, you know. I guess you could say she got what she deserved.”

“You say 'she got what she deserved' so casually… But that's sexual harassment! Or worse, assault!”

“Well, at least her backside was facing away from the audience, ha ha ha!”

“…That's not really the point, is it?”

“It's fine, it's fine! Naja herself went around making everyone present sign non-disclosure agreements, so no problem!”

“Silencing them… There were quite a few people there, weren't there? And rumors like that don't just disappear that easily…”

“Ringo-dono. Don't underestimate that philosopher, 'Akara Naja'. If anyone dares speak of that incident, even at the edge of the universe…”

Instantly, Washu's demeanor transformed into something eerie, like she was about to tell a ghost story. Even through the monitor, the pressure was overwhelming.

“……”

Ringo felt an overwhelming sense of suffocation and swallowed hard.

“…And you know what? In the end, Naja was cleared of any fault during that incident.”

“Well, getting spanked in public would be incredibly embarrassing, wouldn't it…?”

“Hm? Nope. The only time Naja stayed quiet after getting her bare bottom spanked was… um… for the first three months or so, you see.” Washu answered cheerfully, as if the eerie atmosphere and pressure from just moments before had vanished into thin air.

“And even when she was being quiet, it was because she was running around putting out rumors, so I didn't see her… I thought I hadn't seen her in a while, but when she came back, she was completely back to normal.”

“What kind of nerve does she have?”

“Heh heh heh. If you're talking about similar types, there are a few around, aren't there?”

“W-Well…”

For now, that was Seto and Airi. If you lowered the ranks a little, the number reached

several dozen. Of course, that excluded the natural types.

“Huh… But Akara Naja-sama passed away… Ah, no, went missing quite some time ago. Why do you still try to hide it?”

“Ringo-dono, the true terror of a philosopher isn't something that disappears just because they're gone. For example, even as we talk like this right now…”

Click. The connection with Washu abruptly cut off.

“Washu-sama? ……Washu-sama! What happened? Please answer!”

“…That sort of thing, you know. Something might happen.”

Ringo rushed to where Washu's monitor had been displayed. Suddenly, Seto appeared before her eyes. In extreme close-up, lit from below with ghost story-style lighting, her expression was so intensely atmospheric it could have given a child a seizure.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaah!” Startled, Ringo instinctively leapt backward, smacking the back of her head hard against the corner of the rock bath. She curled up, clutching the back of her head.

“Oh dear, you really hit it hard… Are you okay?”

“……Please, don't startle me, Seto-sama.” Ringo's eyes welled up with tears as she gritted her teeth, desperately holding back the pain and anger.

”The ending cost you a few points, but your modest demeanor is commendable. Eighty-five points.” Seto gave a thumbs-up and nodded with satisfaction.

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“When Airi-dono's legs are wide open, she looks like a real old man. That's provocative in its own way, but it's also rather indecent. I think it's the slight ruffled hemline and the line of the water between her breasts that’s really sexy.”

“!”

Ringo quickly adjusted her slightly hiked bathrobe and covered her chest with her hands.

“But Seto-sama, you're acting like an old man too.”

“Like an old man, huh?”

Washu pushed past the sulking Seto and stepped into the frame.

“…So everything up until now was just a joke to make fun of me?”

“Given how the conversation flowed, I can see why you'd think that… But it's all true, you know. Naja only tried to cover up the spanking incident. The MMD thing got stopped by Professor Ikuma. Well, since the initial registration was already done and it had started operating, he tacitly allowed it… but the plaque part…”

“The spanking incident was pretty shocking, but the MMD thing doesn't really feel like something you'd desperately want to hide.” Ringo said with a wry smile.

“Normally, he wasn’t the type to get angry over something like that. But a Philosopher is supposed to be someone who oversees the ethical use of science and technology… He couldn't just let Naja's reckless behavior slide.”

“I see… If he didn't show ethical standards in his everyday actions, it would look bad externally too… That does make sense.”

“Ringo, Ringo. Tōdō says it’s time. That’s all.”

“Yes, I understand. Well then, Washu-sama, I have my next assignment to attend to, so I must take my leave. Thank you for the enlightening conversation.”

“Please keep this conversation strictly confidential, okay?”

“Yes.”

“Mama! Mama!”

As if she couldn't wait for Ringo and Washu's conversation to end, Honoka barged in front of the monitor displaying Washu.

“You waited patiently. Good girl.”

“Mm-hmm! Honoka, good girl?”

“Yes, you're a good girl. See you at your next checkup, Honoka-chan.”

“Mm-hmm♡”

After watching their exchange, Ringo stepped out of the bathtub.

Chapter Two: Let's Shop till We Drop

Seina and the others sat around a table about half a tatami mat in size within the cruiser's core block, listening to Kiriko's explanation. The core block, roughly the size of a six-mat room, had no windows whatsoever and virtually no interior decoration to speak of. It resembled the buffer room where Seina had awakened after his bio-enhancement.

“…And that's what happened that night. Normally, this isn't something we should tell a student like Seina-kun, but by Airi-sama's decision, everyone gathered here has been granted access to all the information.”

“So… that computer problem was my fault, then…” Seina was deeply shocked upon learning the truth about the night he escaped the dormitory.

“It's true that the escape incident was the trigger, but the scale of the chaos that ensued was due to a combination of mistakes across multiple departments.”

“But… if only I hadn’t escaped…”

Even as Kiriko tried to defend him, Seina blamed himself. For Seina, the Academy was the place that had accepted him. Somewhere along the way, he had grown complacent, forgetting that his traits caused trouble for others.

“I guess I just… can't help but cause trouble for someone…”

“Dorm escapes are an Academy tradition. Even Central Command let it slide because of that.” Amane told Seina in a cheerful tone, trying to encourage him as he became increasingly depressed.

“Amane-san is right. Besides… the root cause of the damage spreading that far was the negligence of those who left the old system untouched. Thanks to this commotion, the complex system was unified, and we caught many criminals. The benefits far outweighed the drawbacks. And this sort of incident isn't all that rare in the Academy's history, you know.” Elma joined the conversation in a similarly cheerful tone.

Kiriko, beaten to the punch by the two of them, felt left out and hurriedly tried to say something to Seina.

“!……”

For a moment, Kiriko's expression showed panic and confusion, but she slowly closed her eyes and suppressed it. She thought it would be fine if Amane and Elma could take on the role she had been carrying.

(I ran away from Seina-chan once before.)

On that cliff, Kiriko had sworn to herself that this time, she would stop running away from Seina. Knowing Seina was in space meant he would face many calamities. To avoid them, Kiriko had decided to step back and judge things from a broader perspective.

“Huh? …Oh, right. Actually, the people around Seina were pretty calm, weren't they?”

Amane, who had been watching Kiriko's slow reaction with a puzzled sideways glance, pressed on without letting the conversation die, trying to keep Seina's spirits up.

“Eh…huh”

Seina recalled that night when the whole town was in a festive mood…

“…True, Kenneth and Rajau said that carnival atmosphere was normal…”

“Even that aerial battle and fleet fight chaos felt like just a festival sideshow once it was over, didn't it?”

“Heh heh, so Seina was like the festival's portable shrine, I suppose?”

“Heh, I suppose so.”

“…Seriously, you two, this isn't something to laugh about. Even if the outcome was good, the actual damage was immense, and it's still causing problems in various places…” Kiriko, clearly exasperated, admonished them in a quiet tone.

“Sorry.”

“Ah, I'm not talking about Seina-chan… Seina-kun specifically. It's just that Amane and the others are being so irresponsible…” However, when Seina suddenly apologized to Kiriko, she was surprised and went back to her usual tone.

“Yeah, yeah. You should be the one reflecting, Elma. You're the worst offender here.”

“Huh!? Why me?” Elma, suddenly brought into the conversation, looked taken aback… but then, “Well, now that I think about it, you're absolutely right~~~. Ahahaha. Sorry, Seina-kun.”

“Ah, no, not at all.”

“But you know, the person over there with that nonchalant look on her face is second worst, right?” Elma shot Kiriko a meaningful look.

“?”

Seina and Amane followed Elma's gaze and looked at Kiriko.

“Wh-what? I didn't do anything!” Kiriko, with all three of them focusing their attention on her, pulled away in confusion.

“Oh, you don't know anything? Well, you see, Seina-kun, the patrol car issued the 01 call because of the Clay Probe Kiriko-san was controlling, you know.”

“……What?! You were controlling that…?” Seina, who had looked at Elma for a moment with a blank expression, recalled the probes' odd behavior and turned to Kiriko.

“Wh-why would you… Ugh!”

Kiriko had completely forgotten that Elma was Airi's secretary. Ever since Seina went into space, major incidents followed one after another, and Kiriko's composure was severely strained.

“N-no, that's not it! I was worried it would be dangerous for Seina-chan to go out into the city!” Kiriko, now in a mild panic, turned bright red and began making excuses with exaggerated, almost comical gestures.

“…Seina, so this is what I mean by a compound error.” Amane placed a hand on Seina's shoulder.

“Huh… I see.” Seina replied, seeing how flustered Kiriko was, he felt it would be cruel to press the issue further and corner her.

“Still, Elma, you got off pretty lightly with just this punishment, didn't you?” Satisfied with Seina's answer and Kiriko's reaction, Amane changed the subject.

“Officially, it was a malfunction in Washu-sama's hidden server defense program. So my guilt was dismissed.”

“I see.”

“Honestly, you have no sense of tension! Just to reiterate something important: absolute silence is the absolute condition for your innocence. Try saying even a word…”

At Kiriko's words, Elma made a gesture of placing her hand blade to her throat, and Kiriko silently nodded slightly.

“Well, for the time being, everyone involved is under surveillance. And I've been assigned the task of checking Seina-kun's peculiar probability bias.”

“I see… So the plan is to isolate the key figures together while the evidence is destroyed.” Amane glanced meaningfully at Kiriko, for Kiriko was the watchdog.

“They brought it on themselves. I don't like it either, you know.”

“She says she hates it.” Amane pouted and looked at Elma.

“So we're the ones getting in the way, huh?”

“Just when I thought we could finally be alone, huh?” Amane exchanged glances with Elma, then pressed her hands to her cheeks and swayed her hips as she spoke.

“Both of you, behave yourselves and don't make me have to get involved.” Kiriko let it slide, eyes still closed.

“?”

Amane and Elma sensed something off about Kiriko's cool reaction and exchanged glances.

“Hey, Kiriko's been kind of off since earlier, huh?”

“She gets us partway there, though…”

They whispered to each other while watching Kiriko.

“Well, it looks like we've just arrived at the conclusion of the story.”

Noticing Amane and Elma's gaze, Kiriko cut off the conversation abruptly, as if to avoid further pressure, and stood up.

“Arrived…? Was this ship even moving? I didn't feel any G-force at all though…”

“Because it was in quiet mode. Plus, this block is specially made. Anyway, let's hurry. We've got a lot of things to buy.” Kiriko urged them on and practically dashed out the door.

“Wow… Is all of this a sales floor?”

As Seina stepped out of the elevator, a vast merchandise floor spread before him, rivaling the size of massive shopping malls found in places like America. A central aisle stretched straight ahead, and the wall at the far end was completely out of sight.

“…Um…”

Seina quickly turned around and checked the floor indicator on the large elevator. It displayed a number well over a hundred. That meant there were that many other floors of similar scale.

“This floor is stocked with only the items you'll need when starting a new life, such as entering school or starting a new job, so there aren't many products, but the specialized staff has put together a selection of long-selling items, from ultra-luxury brands to general merchandise, so it's well-known that you can't go wrong no matter what you buy.”

Kiriko touched one of the large automatic carts lined up before her and began walking. The cart immediately started following her.

“Not that many… you mean these?”

Following Kiriko and the others as they started walking, Seina entered an area lined with product shelves. The shelves, about three meters high, displayed a wide variety of products from numerous manufacturers, even within a single category.

“Since we have the actual products here, it inevitably takes up a lot of space. Usually, you pick from a catalog, and have it delivered to your home… but seeing the actual products lined up like this is more fun, right?” Kiriko said with a delighted look.

“That kind of insistence you have, Kiriko, really feels like something from Earth.”

“Oh, Amane-san. You say that, but you seem to be enjoying yourself quite a bit.” Elma glanced over at Amane's large carry-on, already packed with a considerable number of ultra-luxury brand items.

“Well, shopping is a form of entertainment, after all.”

“That's true. Buying necessities is essentially hunting, after all. It satisfies our innate biological instincts and serves as a form of stress relief.”

Not to be outdone by Amane, Elma also began selecting items.

“Huh, I see…”

Watching Amane and Elma, Seina recalled his time since arriving in space.

“Kiriko-san, after living here for a few days, I realized something. Life in space is surprisingly similar to life on Earth, isn't it?” He'd asked this several times before, but he still wanted to hear Kiriko's opinion as someone from Earth.

“That's true. …But as long as people retain their human form, perhaps their lifestyle won't change. As Airi-sama once said… eliminating waste to make things more convenient isn't always the best approach. Creating waste and embracing inconvenience can also be progress.”

“Waste…?”

“Take the products here, for instance. If only function mattered, we wouldn't need this many varieties. And with this world's scientific capabilities, you could even argue that physical bodies aren't necessary at all. Yet, outwardly, they look no different from Earthlings… It just shows how many people still want to retain a human form, I suppose. Anyway, Seina-chan. Let's move on.” Kiriko placed an item in the basket, then took Seina's hand and began pulling him along.

“Looks like you're back to your usual self, Kiriko.”

“Yeah.”

Watching Kiriko cheerfully take the lead and start walking, Amane and Elma exchanged glances.

“…Still, with this many varieties, just choosing is exhausting… Just looking at it all makes me feel full already.”

Seina seemed a little overwhelmed by the sight of what must have been over a thousand different types of soap, but Kiriko was delighted as she lined up some of the products on the shelves of her cart.

“This one's nice, and that one's not bad either… Which do you prefer, Seina-chan?”

“Ah, either one is fine…”

“Either one is no good. It's something that Seina-chan will use, so you should decide.”

Kiriko insisted, so Seina compared the displayed items. But they were all from brands he'd never seen or heard of. And since they were unscented types, he could only compare them by appearance—whether solid or liquid, the shape of the container, and so on. But Seina had a more important criterion for his choice.

“Well then, for now… the cheapest one with the most quantity…”

Unlike Amane and the others, Seina's funds were limited. Even with the temporary income from that meat deal, he couldn't afford to waste money. But in reality, Seina possessed enough money that he could buy out this entire department store without batting an eye.

(Seina-chan… You really don't need to decide based on that kind of criteria… But, well, it is better not to waste money, isn't it?) Kiriko looked at Seina with a slightly confused expression, but she selected the items based on Seina's criteria.

Amane and Elma watched the two of them, giggling quietly.

“Wh-what? What's so funny?” Kiriko glared at them, looking slightly creeped out.

“Kiriko, you two look just like newlyweds.”

“Huh? … Ah!”

This floor sold items necessary for starting a new life, so there were many newlywed couples around. When Amane pointed this out, Kiriko finally realized how they must look to others and flushed bright red, looking down.

“We can't let them beat us.”

Perhaps inspired by Kiriko's fresh-faced demeanor, Elma grabbed Seina's hand and led him to another section. She arranged the products just like Kiriko had done, then said, “Hey, Seina-kun, which bath salts should we get? The fragrances and ingredients aren't just for calming your mind, you know. Some actually lift your spirits also.”

She leaned into Seina with a teasing look. Before Seina could recover from his blush, Amane snatched him away from Elma and pulled him close. “Seina. More importantly, let's go look at bathrobes. I'll let you pick mine. Oh, but… maybe it's better if I'm not wearing anything?”

“Th-that's…”

Faced with Kiriko, Elma, and finally the stunningly beautiful Amane all in full-on newlywed wife mode, Seina panicked and started to tear up.

“I'm still choosing soap! I'll choose the fragrance and the bathrobe too!”

Recovering from the shock of the newlywed declaration, Kiriko pulled the two away from

Seina. But Amane and Elma, finding it even more amusing, leaned closer to Seina.

“Kiriko is the only one who's cheating.”

“Exactly!”

“It's not cheating… It's not like that. I'm going to be busy cleaning up and I don't have much time, so I'm not the one choosing it.”

Unaware her actions were only provoking Amane and Elma, Kiriko stubbornly pulled them apart.

“If it's just about choosing, we could do that too.”

“Besides, even if you're childhood friends, you didn't actually live together, did you?”

The tug-of-war irritated Kiriko, robbing her of sound judgment. Amane's provocative tone and expression stung Kiriko's pride.

“It's practically like we lived together! I even bathed him when he was a kid, and I know every single one of your food preferences! … Hah!”

By the time Kiriko realized she'd fallen for Amane's provocation, it was too late. Both Amane and Elma wore smug, satisfied grins.

“Ho ho ho~~~ Did you hear that, Elma?”

“Yes, with these very ears.”

Kiriko's face flushed scarlet. All will to retort drained from her, and she slumped, head bowed.

“Kiriko-san.”

“Hey, Seina-kun. Let's all understand each other completely.”

Elma and Amane grabbed Seina's hands as he tried to rush to Kiriko, rubbing against him playfully.

“Exactly. Since Elma and I are all under the same roof…”

“No way! Absolutely not! I won't allow it!”

At that moment, a scream bordering on a shout came from behind Amane and the others.

“Tch, just when things were getting good…”

With a look of utter disgust, Amane and the others turned to see Seiryo standing there, having crawled straight out of the sea, still carrying the scent of the tide.

“Ha ha ha! That's right. Perfect timing! A beautiful fiancée attacked by primitive savages…

and this Tennan Seiryo coming to her rescue… what a scene!”

As if deliberately rubbing salt in Amane's wounds, Seiryo began loudly spouting lines twisted to suit his own agenda. Yet Amane endured the mental anguish, deliberately letting Seiryo rant.

“Amane. I too am a proud member of the GP. I fully understand that both outstanding students and those who seem far from it must be treated equally as assets! But isn't it only right that an outstanding instructor like Amane should teach only students who are equally outstanding? Fortunately, for Yamada Seina…kun, who seems far from it, there's the kind-hearted Masaki-sensei who volunteered to be his guardian…”

“Ugh, you're so persistent. I'm doing this because I want to!”

Sensing a lapse in Seiryo's focus, Amane cut him off. Then, with a thoroughly spoiled expression, she rubbed up against Seina.

“…After all, Seina and I are on first-name terms. We've even kissed.”

“Wh-!” “Huh?” “Huh?” “Huh?”

Even the incredibly insensitive Tennan Seiryo was taken aback by the words. But Seiryo wasn't the only one. Kiriko, Elma, and even Seina himself sang in perfect harmony, and after a moment, everyone's attention was on Seina.

“Hmph!”

Amane, equipped with anti-guardian sollets **(TN: Lower leg armor, had to search for this one!)**, quickly circled around to Seiryo’s side, leaving him defenseless, and delivered low, middle, and high kicks in an instant.

—Gyaaaaaaaaaaaan.

With a nasty metallic clang, Seiryo's Guardian shattered, leaving him unprotected. Seiryo, kicked again in the abdomen, was sent flying into the large waste disposal chute mounted on the packing room wall and was swallowed whole by it.

“He… got swallowed? What about the anti-personnel safety device… Oh, I see. So that's the Tennan exception. But that's incredible… Normally, would they even disable the anti-personnel safety device?”

“He's trash! Trash belongs in the trash bin!”

Spouting what sounded like a slogan, Amane turned toward Seina and the others with a satisfied look. Right before her eyes, another hellish scene (?) was unfolding between Kiriko and Seina.

“A kiss… What does that mean? I won't get angry, so please tell me honestly.”

People who say they won't get angry and then don't get angry… well, they're practically

nonexistent. Especially considering Kiriko's demonic expression.

(Is it just me, or does she already look furious?~)

Seina's cry was barely audible. He just shook his head desperately, his face on the verge of tears. Even trouble-hardened Seina found Kiriko's pressure overwhelming enough to induce panic.

“As someone entrusted with your care by Seina-chan's parents, I absolutely cannot tolerate such behavior. So… you understand?” When Kiriko saw that Seina remained silent, her expression suddenly softened, her voice grew gentle, adopting a tone like she was persuading a child.

Precisely because of that gentle, insistent “understand?” was terrifying enough to make his knees buckle.

(Does this mean I'm already guilty as charged~~? Honestly, a kiss? A happy event like that? In my entire life so far… No, even looking ahead, I can't imagine such an opportunity ever occurring!)

Sadly, in Seina's case, declaring it “impossible” was the more probable outcome. For starters, if such a fact existed, it couldn't possibly not be in his memory. Seina desperately searched for possibilities.

(Wait… but what if it was an accident caused by bad luck… like, our lips just touched when we bumped into each other…)

“Seina-chan!” Kiriko's merciless voice sounded like a quiz show time-up buzzer.

If Seina had just a little more time, he might have reached one possibility.

“…I have absolutely no memory of doing anything like that.” Seina finally gave up, looking desperately toward Amane, hoping she would prove his innocence.

“Oh dear, have you forgotten?”

But Seina's hopes were dashed. As if to make matters worse, Amane put on a sad expression and leaned into Seina.

—Crack!

A thick vein bulged on Kiriko's temple.

It was an unmistakable warning sign. Seina had seen Kiriko wear this expression many times before. But that anger had always been directed at those who bullied Seina.

“Aaaaaaah, Amane…san”

Knowing full well the intensity and danger of this, Seina tried to escape, thinking it was hopeless. But Amane grabbed him firmly, this time removing his jacket to prevent escape,

wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. Yet from the outside, this position looked exactly like Amane was giving Seina a passionate embrace.

—Crack! Crack!

Kiriko's inner pressure of anger surged even higher.

“See? Back then…”

Leaning seductively against Seina, Amane's slender fingers stroked Seina's jaw, slowly caressing from shoulder to chest.

—Crack! Crack! Crack!

Kiriko's internal pressure continued to mount. The more she endured, the more intensely it condensed. It was clear to anyone watching that once it exploded, the damage would be devastating.

(That's it! Elma-san is…)

At that moment, Seina remembered another person who might have intervened. But that hope was in vain; Elma had taken refuge behind a shelf a short distance away from Seina and the others, pretending not to notice.

And finally, he reached the conclusion he should never have reached—leaving it up to fate.

——Crack!

But at that perfect moment, just as the final dam threatened to break.

“…I did it for you. C.P.R.” Amane glanced at Kiriko and said with a smug grin.

“Ah!”

In that instant, Kiriko and Seina simultaneously realized it was what had happened at the Masaki residence on Earth. They could feel the tension in the room instantly ease.

“Phew…”

Seina felt relieved that the immediate crisis had been averted, but that relief was only skin-deep. Inside Kiriko, pent-up stress raged, searching for an outlet.

Just as she redirected her anger from Seina toward Amane, “…Amane… Knock it off.”

“I'm terribly sorry, but you are absolutely correct, ma’am.”

A polite yet resolute voice came from behind Kiriko.

“Huh?”

The three turned toward the voice and saw shoppers watching them from a distance, store

clerks, and a man who seemed to be their supervisor.

“Ma’am. We sincerely apologize, but… this is causing a nuisance to other customers.”

At the largest table in the Nashisu set meal restaurant, Kiriko activated the monitor, selecting household items through mail order she'd missed buying at the store. Seina sat silently beside her, while Elma sat awkwardly across from them. Amane had taken refuge at a counter table a little further away.

“Hey, Kiriko, cheer up already, will ya?” Unable to bear the silence any longer, Amane spoke to Kiriko in a soothing voice.

“This is no joke! It's all your fault I got kicked out! …It was a place I really liked, but now I'm too embarrassed to go back.”

“…I'm sorry. See?” Amane bowed her head sincerely toward Kiriko.

“……”

But Kiriko remained silent, staring intently at the monitor. Even Elma seemed tired of this stalemate. She stepped in to help Amane, addressing Kiriko. ”Hey, Kiriko-san, please forgive her. I'm just as much to blame.”

“Amane went too far.”

“…We're living together now because it's an order… But when I received that order… when I thought about living with everyone… I somehow felt a little happy. So I got a little carried away…” Elma scratched her head awkwardly as she spoke.

“……”

Hearing Elma's words, Kiriko glanced sideways at Seina. Sure enough, Seina, who had been told “I'm looking forward to living together, “ looked delighted. For Seina, who was always told “Don't come over here,” Elma's words were the happiest thing imaginable. The biggest reason he wanted to be at the Academy, in space, was because it was a place where he felt accepted, needed.

(Dammit… Elma, hitting me where it hurts~!)

Kiriko's resistance lasted only until Seina's pleading gaze turned toward her.

“Fine. I give in.” Kiriko sighed softly, resigned.

Ultimately, Kiriko, like Seina, looked forward to living with someone who accepted him. Even if it meant becoming the butt of jokes herself, seeing Seina's happy face brought her joy.

“But with Amane, he stands out enough as it is. She really needs to rein it in more, or she'll

cause trouble for Seina-kun.”

“Got it, got it, understood. Anyway, as an apology, I'll treat you guys here.” Amane trotted over to Kiriko and the others' table like a puppy called by its owner, and plopped down next to Elma.

“Alright, let's eat. Ah, Seina-kun. Could you go to the kitchen and tell the lady to bring our order?”

“Hey, Amane!”

“It's fine, it's fine. Seina, the lady here is hard of hearing, so you have to call out 'Auntie!' really loud for her to hear you.”

“Got it…?” Seina stood up, feeling slightly confused at the exchange.

He looked over at Kiriko, but…

“Yeah… please do.” Kiriko said hesitantly, then quickly turned her attention back to the monitor.

Seina didn't dwell on it further. He left his seat and headed toward the kitchen beyond the counter. On the counter sat a transparent case filled with prepared dishes—simmered and grilled vegetables, fish, meat, and more, all steaming.

(Wow… that looks delicious.)

When he first entered the shop, the awkward atmosphere had made him overlook it, but everything looked simple and appetizing.

(These dishes have a nostalgic feel to them… Oh!)

Seina, who had been staring at the dishes, turned away from the counter and noticed a woman in a kitchen apron working busily.

“Excuse me, Auntie, may I have our order, please?”?”

However, the woman didn't seem to hear and didn't stop working.

“Oh, right… Excuse me~~. Auntie, may I have our order …”

Remembering Amane's earlier words, he raised her voice slightly. At that, the woman in the apron stopped her hands and slowly turned to face Seina.

“Au~~n~~tie?”

The woman who turned towards Seina with a voice that seemed to resonate from the depths of the earth was Airi, with an angry look on her face.

“!”

As Seina instinctively spun to flee, a hand—slender like a whitebait fish, yet concealing immense strength—clamped down firmly on his shoulder. The impact felt like a demon had seized his heart.

At the table where Seina tried to call for help, Amane clapped her hands and roared with laughter, Elma waved cheerfully with a smile, and Kiriko, though staring intently at the monitor, was probably laughing too—her shoulders were shaking slightly.

“Hey… Seina-kun.” Airi slowly leaned closer, her face right beside Seina's. But he was too terrified to meet her eyes. Only her bright red lips stood out.

“…Did you just call me auntie? Well, let me tell you something: I'm not an auntie.” Airi's whisper was chillingly cold, yet her smile was incredibly gentle.

Seina's face was covered in kiss marks, and he was forced to write hundreds of lines saying “I'm not going to call you auntie anymore” like a punishment in elementary school.

“That was cruel.” Seina shot a sullen glance at Kiriko, who looked away, embarrassed.

“I-I'm sorry… I just couldn't control myself…”

“I'm sorry, Seina-kun. This kind of mischief towards Airi-sama… well, it just makes you want to do it, doesn't it?” Elma clasped her hands and whispered softly to Seina.

(…Well, I guess it's better to experience the fear of dying than that tense atmosphere.)

Just as Seina was thinking this, Airi, looking thoroughly satisfied after thoroughly teasing him, arrived carrying a large tray laden with side dishes and rice.

“…But why is the Academy’s Chairman running a restaurant?” Seina looked up at Airi while continuing to write his lines.

“Well, someone who helped me out in the past asked me to take over the shop. Plus, cooking is my hobby.”

“Huh… Your hobby?”

“The person who originally ran this place told me, “If you can make delicious food, you can

make a living anywhere.” Since then, no matter how busy I get, I've continued to cook.”

(The Academy's Chairman, and skilled enough to run a restaurant… Capable and domestic, huh… Huh, if only her personality wasn't so…)

“…Hmm. You look like you're thinking something incredibly rude.” Airi, quick to notice Seina's sigh, looked at him happily.

“Ah! …No, I mean, being busy as the chairman and running a restaurant too, I just think it's amazing…”

“Heh heh, well, I'll just take the compliment part. That's enough of your apology. Please, come and have a seat on the terrace.”

At Airi's prompting, Seina and the others moved towards the terrace. Stepping out from inside the shop onto the terrace, Seina was overwhelmed by the magnificent view spread before him.

The sheer cliff face soaring seven hundred meters high was unnaturally smooth, making it hard to believe it was formed by erosion. And while Seina couldn't be certain from his vantage point, the cliff appeared to have been carved into a circular shape, dozens of kilometers in diameter. Several tube-like roads extended toward a central building.

“What do you think? Pretty amazing, huh?” Airi called out to Seina as she began arranging the food on the terrace's best seats.

“What is this? It looks a bit unnatural…” Seina's words were cut off as a monitor appeared before them.

“… Is this circular thing… here? … A crater?”

It showed a perfectly circular inlet near the coastline.

“It's not a meteorite crater, though. This was created when someone's experiment went haywire. They call it “Washu's Pore”.” Airi casually explained this immense spectacle while efficiently arranging the dishes.

“Washu's pore? Washu is…” Seina stopped mid-sentence and clamped his mouth shut in panic.

(Washu… Could that be Tenchi-senpai's…) Seina remembered he wasn't supposed to talk about Tenchi.

Airi nodded, as if confirming that thought.

“But it's not just about pores, you know.”

“Well, I just mean this isn't a big deal. Anyway, let's drop it. More importantly, eat while it's still hot.”

“Ah, yes.”

Glancing at the scenery, Seina bowed slightly to Airi, who pulled out a chair for him, and sat down at the table. Delicious-looking dishes were laid out. Being hungry, Seina's interest shifted from the view to the food. He picked up his chopsticks and reached for the simmered vegetables.

“Itadakimasu…”

Everyone watched Seina's first bite.

“How is it? It might be a little bland…”

“It's delicious. The seasoning… feels very familiar.”

When Seina said that Kiriko smiled meaningfully.

“Ah! This… it tastes like Kiriko-san's family cooking!”

“Correct. The Masaki family's basic seasoning comes from Airi-sama's.”

“Huh… I didn't know that.”

The Academy meals were perfectly delicious, but encountering a familiar taste was still a joy. The fact that Airi was the root of that seasoning transformed her presence in Seina's mind from just a troublemaker to someone much closer.

“Now, please eat up.”

“Yes!”

Surrounded by the smiling faces of Kiriko, Amane, and Elma, Seina happily reached for his chopsticks. But that happiness didn't last long.

Suddenly, Seina felt something wet hit his face. Before he could even recognize it as a white glove, where it was falling became far more important.

“Ah!”

Everyone cried out, reaching to grab the glove that was about to land on his food. But mercilessly, the foul-smelling glove fell onto the dishes.

“!!”

The next instant, everyone simultaneously looked in the direction the glove had flown from.

“Yamada Seina, I challenge you to a duel!”

Standing there, his expression serious but covered in filth and reeking of garbage, was Seiryo.

“Since you underwent Bio-Enhancement, the conditions are equal. I'll beat you senseless without holding back. You, born and raised on the frontier, will never get your hands on Amane…”

“Who the hell walks into a restaurant looking like that?!” Airi was the first to move.

—Gyaaaaaaaaaah!

Airi's fist slammed into Seiryo's solar plexus, shattering his Guardian with a high-pitched metallic clang. Then, from who knows where, Airi produced a heavy-looking marble rolling pin and smashed it into the back of Seiryo's head.

“Gah!”

Seiryo lost consciousness instantly, his body slowly collapsing.

“Finish him!”

Just like at the department store, Amane powered her Guardian-counter anklet to maximum output and delivered a kick to Seiryo with all her might.

“Guh!”

Seiryo flew like a projectile, crossing the store and smashing through the lid of the automated takeout packaging system mounted on the wall beside the register.

—Kyuuiiiiiiin.

Despite the impact, the automatic packaging machine functioned normally, instantly boxing Seiryo up.

“Delivery—where to?” Airi calmly asked Amane.

“Freeze it in a pack and drop it from satellite orbit onto the farthest uncharted planet within the delivery zone.”

“Thanks as always.”

With a beep, the package was transported away somewhere.

“Alright, I'll bring a replacement dish, so sit tight. Oh, and let's pack this dirty side dish along with that idiot.”

Airi wiped Seina's dirty cheek with a damp towel, retrieved the dish touched by the filthy glove, and went inside the shop. A pleasant breeze from the sea instantly blew away the earlier stench, restoring the space to freshness and quietness.

“Alright, pest controls done. Let's eat.” Amane sat down and began to eat the food that had survived.

“Oh, Amane, could you give me the shipment tracking number? I've arranged for the

packages to be transferred to my cruiser, but there's quite a lot, so I don't think it'll be easy to move it directly from the cruiser to the house.”

“When we get there, okay?”

“Yes. Let's go home as soon as we finish eating. We've taken up more time than we expected, so we need to hurry, or we won't be able to finish cleaning up by the end of the day.” Kiriko hastily picked up her pace, urging everyone to hurry.

Seeing this, Amane frowned slightly, looking a bit annoyed. “If it's just sorting today's purchases, it shouldn't take that long, right? As for Kiriko and the others' moving boxes, the housekeeper should already be handling those…”

“Housekeeper!? Why would we have one?” Kiriko stopped eating and looked at Amane with a look of complete surprise.

“Our place doesn't have an auto-keeper facility.”

“Wh-why wouldn't you have something so basic?!”

“Amane-san's place is a super luxury apartment, so hiring a housekeeper is normal. There was even a dedicated person at the front desk. It's a status symbol for the wealthy.”

“What a waste… I could handle the housekeeping myself.”

“We have schoolwork too, and even though it's not that big, Kiriko couldn't manage it alone. Besides, I'm the one covering the hiring costs.”

“…Um… What exactly is a housekeeper?”

“Hmm?… Ah, to put it simply, maid-san, maid-san.”

“Maid-san?”

For men, “maid” was one of those words that stirred up fantasies. It would be no surprise if Seina sounded a little happy. But Kiriko, noticing that tone, looked a little displeased, and Amane didn't miss it.

“Heh heh heh… You can choose from all sorts of maid outfits. What would you like to pick, Seina?”

With that, sample images of maid outfits appeared before Seina.

“Hey! Did you forget why we were all gathered here?”

Kiriko stood up abruptly, slamming her hand down on the table, then held one hand up in front of Seina's face to block his view of the monitor.

(Maid-san…)

This wasn't some petty compensation for commoners in a shady cafe—a real maid-san was

in Amane's house. And the dreamlike situation of being able to choose her costume. While the sample images were incredibly tempting, Kiriko's disapproval meant giving up was the only option. Seina quickly shifted his attention back to the meal. Thankfully, his hunger and Airi's food were enough to make him forget about it.

“Hey Kiriko, it's a company that sends maids to royalty and heads of state, so it's fine. They have a solid reputation among my connections too, and there's absolutely no way it'll cause any problems.”

“But there's the probability issue with Seina-chan, right?”

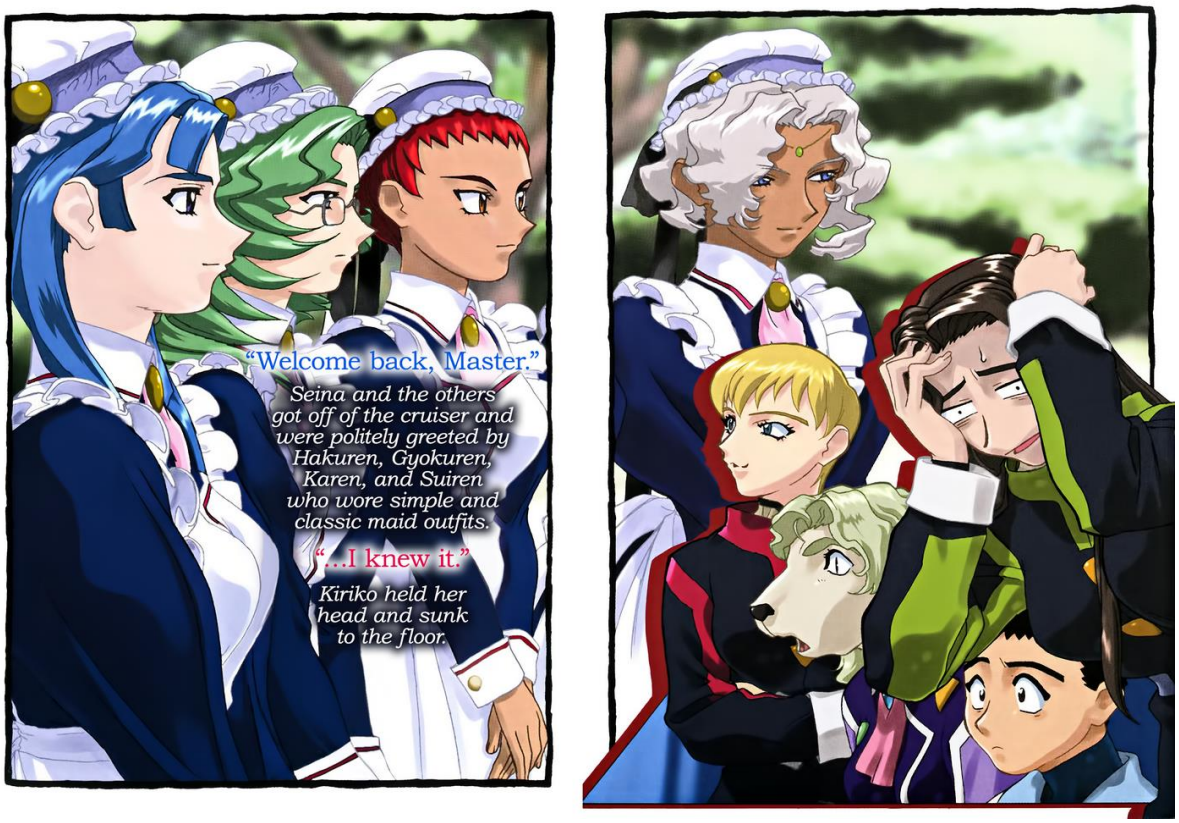
“It was Mikami-sama who told me to use that place.”

“Mi-Mikami-sama?!”

Kiriko had a bad feeling, and it was only when she returned to Amane's house that she realized her feeling was correct.

Chapter Three: Maid in Amane’s House

“Welcome home, Master.”


“Welcome back, Master.”
Seina and the others got off of the cruiser and were politely greeted by Hakuren, Gyokuren, Karen, and Suiren who wore simple and classic maid outfits.
“…I knew it.”
Kiriko held her head and sunk to the floor.

Hakuren, Gyokuren, Karen, and Suiren—all dressed in simple, old-fashioned maid uniforms—greeted Seina and the others as they stepped off the cruiser, bowing

respectfully.

“…I knew it.” Kiriko clutched her head and collapsed on the spot.

“Now then, you must be tired.”

As Seina pointed at Hakuren and the others, about to say something, Hakuren approached gracefully, took his hand, and said, “Seina-sama, please keep it confidential that we are from Jurai.”

Seina nodded silently to Hakuren's whispered request.

“Wow… This is the first time I've seen someone as beautiful as Amane-san.” Elma stared at the four maids, especially Gyokuren, muttering in stunned silence.

Amane, however, remained surprisingly calm. “She might be prettier than me… Huh, so they do exist.”

“Oh? No rivalry?”

“If it were the past, maybe, but I chose a profession unrelated to such things.” Amane laughed it off, seemingly unconcerned.

But Elma clearly felt awkward and covered her mouth. “Ah… I'm sorry.”

“It's fine. Still, as expected of someone Mikami-sama recommended, they all have such presence. They wouldn't look out of place in the imperial court, those girls.”

“But isn't it a bit of a temptation for Seina-kun? That kind of attire has a certain allure, and when we were talking at Nashisu, he seemed quite interested too.”

“It's fine. They're professionals. They know it's strictly forbidden to have any unnecessary relations with the master… Well, there is one who looks a bit uneasy though.”

Amane glanced at Gyokuren with a hint of unease, and Elma nodded silently.

“Well, we have an excellent guard dog, so it should be fine.”

Just as Amane said, Kiriko, radiating an aura of anger, was approaching Gyokuren.

“I'd like to discuss the division of household duties. Could the housekeepers gather here for a moment?”

Leading the four of them into the kitchen, Kiriko glanced around before raising her voice.

“What do you think you're doing!?”

“Oh… what a scary face.”

Facing Kiriko's glare, Gyokuren stared back with a provocative gaze that seemed to rub salt in the wound. Sensing the tense atmosphere, Hakuren hurriedly stepped between them.

“Gyokuren, be quiet! Now, Kiriko… no, Kiriko-sama. I don't think an explanation is necessary at this point, is it?”

“You want to say it's Seto-sama's orders to guard Seina-chan, right? But you didn't have to do it like this!”

“You received the report regarding the incident that was discovered at the entrance ceremony, right? And given that there was yesterday’s kidnapping, I believe that this type of protection is unavoidable.”

“Ugh…” Kiriko recalled the explosion at the entrance ceremony and the brain-modified spy it had uncovered.

“Currently, in Jurai, those possessing third-generation or higher Royal Trees are leading investigations, starting with their own close associates… naturally, we are no exception. Kiriko-sama, you should have been checked when you spoke with Mikami-sama, correct?”

“!”

Kiriko remembered the trailer-type conference room. Its purpose wasn't to keep secrets, but to isolate Kiriko in an emergency.

“We're prioritizing checks starting with the highest-ranking positions. Unfortunately, in Seina-sama's case, the priority is quite low.”

“So… lower than mine?”

“Yes. While most hold high expectations for Seina-sama's future potential… to put it bluntly, it's considered that he has already fulfilled his role sufficiently.”

“So the present is more important than the future, huh?”

“Yes. Therefore, this assignment is a personal request from Seto-sama and Mikami-sama.”

“……”Kiriko, having grasped the gravity of the situation, fell silent.

Seina held great potential, but it was ultimately a double-edged sword. Indeed, while many incidents involving Seina had yielded significant results, they had also brought about numerous calamities. Rapid change demanded a corresponding resolve. While it could resolve matters swiftly, it would demand immense effort and entail significant sacrifices of vested interests. And surprisingly, those who disapproved of such a course were often those in high positions. Especially now, when their own footing was precarious. Rather than pinning hopes on Seina's future, they preferred to settle for acknowledging only his past achievements.

“I must thank you both for your consideration… but…”

“I understand Kiriko-sama's concerns. That's why Gyokuren's troubles were properly resolved before coming here, and we have support units standing by under our command. I've also instructed those girls to keep watch, so it should be fine… probably.” Hakuren said, looking at Gyokuren with Kiriko, sounding a bit unsure.

“That's terrible. I didn't do anything.”

“Shut up! The men only Widow!”

“Pfft!”

Karen's words made everyone burst out laughing. Anyway, Gyokuren's exceptional beauty often caused trouble with men. A simple glance or gesture could drive a man crazy.

“That's quite the apt description.”

“I didn't do anything!”

“If you do something, it'll be a big problem! What did you do on that spaceship full of newlyweds last time you were on vacation?”

“What, what, what? Was that vacation when Karen came home dizzy?”

Everyone who was interested in what Karen had to say gathered together and a chat began.

“It was such a sweet scene, I just teased him a little.”

“That little bit ended up driving hundreds of couples to divorce by the end of the tour!”

“Oh, about five couples were fine, though.”

“If I hadn't stopped her, who knows what would've happened to those five?”

“Probably one would have been fine. Seina-sama is the type for that one, so relax.”

“……”

Everyone was stunned by the catastrophe that exceeded all expectations. Gyokuren's stories always went like this.

“N-never mind… I'll have to rely on Seto-sama and Mikami-sama to protect Seina-chan… Anyway, as long as you're here, Gyokuren, please don't intentionally cause trouble for any men, and stay out of their sight.” Kiriko said weakly, holding her head, regretting having ever taken an interest.

“What about Seina-sama? Otherwise I can't do my job.”

“…I will reluctantly allow it. However!”

“Yes. I will never do anything that would make Kiriko-sama angry.”

“…!”Suddenly, Kiriko was overcome with a sensation of goosebumps all over her body.

Gyokuren was most beautiful when she had a serious expression on her face. She was almost divine. And Kiriko wasn't the only one who felt that way.

“It's okay, just relax a bit…”

Karen, her own skin still prickling, tugged Gyokuren's cheek. Instantly, her divine, imposing aura vanished, and Kiriko and the others breathed sighs of relief.

“Anyway, Gyokuren, stay away from Seina-chan's room unless it's an emergency!” Kiriko said this a bit roughly, as if to shake herself out of her daze, then headed from the kitchen toward the living room.

Nashisu, where Seina and the others had just been, had many regulars who loved its taste and atmosphere, and the number of them had accumulated over its long history and reached quite a large number. Naturally, due to Nashisu's store size and the distance some had to travel, not everyone could dine there. That's why, around the time Airi took over as manager, she established a special membership system and began a delivery service.

Here, in Nashisu's second kitchen, dozens of cooks bustled about preparing for the evening rush. The second kitchen was factory-sized, where they made boxed lunches for delivery. However, due to computer troubles over the past few days, many shops were closed, and Nashisu, operating normally, was flooded with three times its usual orders.

SHIN TENCHI MUYO! RYO-OHKI GAIDEN
真・天地無用！魎皇鬼外伝
天地無用！GXP 4
TENCHI MUYO! GXP 4
“If it was going to become this busy, maybe we should have said that we had computer trouble as well?”
Airi complained as she wore the skin-tight cleansuit. She was checking the special-order lunches that were in layered, lacquered boxes.

“If I'd known it would get this busy, maybe we should have just said we had computer trouble too?” Airi, clad in a tight-fitting suit worn in a highly sterile and dust-free room used in precision parts manufacturing, grumbled as she checked the custom-made bento lunch box placed in a lacquered tiered box.

Adjusting the delicate arrangement and replacing misshapen ingredients, she moved to the last bento box.

“Airi-sama, the regulars here wouldn't believe a place like yours had any kind of trouble, “ The floor chief, who had joined her to double-check the arrangements, said with a laugh.

“Damn it! Some people know that and deliberately order these troublesome

things anyway… Alright, OK. Then I'll leave the delivery procedures and tonight's shop duty to you.” Waving lightly to the bowing cooks, Airi headed for the transfer gate that also served as the sterilization and quarantine room.

Emerging from the transfer gate in her private room below the Chairman's office, still in her underwear, Airi plopped down on the sofa and began checking her emails.

As the Academy's Chairman, the volume of emails arriving daily was staggering. Her secretaries sorted them by priority, forwarding only the absolute minimum requiring her approval about three times a day. Even so, the number displayed never fell below a hundred. Airi rechecked them using her custom filter, categorizing several without reading them at all, then replied verbally, attaching her responses as she sent them back.

“Please continue your diligent efforts.”

“Shut up and get it done!”

“Cut it out already!”

“I'll kill you!”

And finally, one email remained.

“……Raireza? Well, well, a rare visitor. Is it about Amane-chan?”

Just as she was about to open the email, a message came in from Minaho.

“How are you, Mom?”

“Oh Minaho… you're still the same? Is there something I can help you with today?”

“I heard Seina-kun moved, so I thought I'd bring him a little something to celebrate.” Minaho pointed at the transfer gate in Airi's room.

Immediately, a case about the size of a costume trunk, filled with fresh food, materialized there.

“Funaho-sama sent this for Seina-kun. Handmade soba and udon noodles.”

“Funaho-sama? Why??”

“Well, he's Tenchi-kun's friend, and his situation is similar to hers. You know, Seina-kun is Special Case Number Two, right?”

“I see. But then, why not send it directly instead of to his place… Oh right, communication is restricted there until that check is done, isn't it?”

“Yes, I really wish I could visit Amane-san's house in person, but I'm too busy and can’t get away...”

“So, what's the deal?”

“Thanks to Washu-sama, we were able to check the home planet and key locations much quicker than expected. We're currently expanding the scope of our checks…”

“So the epicenter is here after all… Well, either way, there's no point dwelling on it here. I'll deliver that package directly to Seina-kun myself.”

“Don't get in Kiriko-chan or Seina-kun's way too much, okay?” Minaho joked, then hung up the phone before anyone could counterattack.

“…I'm not getting in the way!” Airi, looking nothing like a mother with her childish expression and posture, cursed at the empty space where the monitor had been.

But then, noticing someone's feet within her line of sight, Airi slowly looked up.

“… Eavesdropping is not a good habit, Principal Mikami.”

“I did knock, but more importantly, I feel sorry for the girl who had to answer the door in her underwear. Hahaha.”

“…It's fine, we're mother and daughter, and we're both women.” Airi puffed out her cheeks and quickly got up from her cross-legged position and sat upright.

“Still, it seems both Funaho-sama and Minaho-san are quite concerned about Seina-kun. I even got a message about that luggage. “Please stop Mom if she causes trouble at Seina-kun's place.” Mikami laughed as she lifted a slightly tall, patterned barrel wrapped in gift paper.

“Damn it! That little brat! Who the hell do you think your mother is?!”

“If we'd let Airi-sama handle it, she might have caused a huge scene over there. It was actually a very sensible decision.”

“Tch, if she's capable of such consideration, she should just go get married already… Damn it, the Kanemitsu family's hopes are dashed too… Honestly, if Kiriko-chan and Tsukiko-chan weren't here, I'd just dump it on Seina-kun.”

“Jurai has a thing for early harvests. She got our Misao too.”

“But Kuramitsu doesn't have anyone suitable right now, do you? Mihoshi-chan is with Tenchi-chan.”

“Oh, I'm single too, you know.” Mikami's eyes held a lustrous quality unthinkable for an old woman.

“……You noticed? You look pretty serious. Did meeting her affect you?”

“!”

Mikami looked at Airi in surprise. “That woman” was, of course, Widow, but in her conversations with Airi, talking about her was taboo. Yet for Airi, it was already becoming a

thing of the past.

“Yes… that may be true.” Mikami recalled the time she met Widow and answered cautiously.

“The shock of meeting her reminded me of when I met Seto-sama. Only with her, it's… how should I put it… it feels like the desire part of people is specialized.”

Widow's trait was transmitting that emotion. Mikami shuddered and stopped herself from remembering any further.

“I'm sorry. Let's drop this topic. But if you're joining the fight, even Minaho would be inadequate… I suppose I should be the one to oppose you…”

“Hohoho, you left this with me because you were worried about those lines? That's why you entrusted this to me?”

“Hmph!”

“Still, it's strange, isn't it? Minaho-san seems like she'd make a good wife.”

“But the mischievous younger sister got married first, didn't she? Well, maybe it's the pattern where the quiet one ends up drawing the short straw. Noike-chan almost ended up that way too…”

Just then, an unread email alert flashed.

“Oops, don’t do that.”

Airi opened the email from Raireza and began to read it. Mikami didn't miss the change in Airi's expression as she read the email, and immediately began working on some urgent paperwork that she had left unfinished.

“……Hey, Mikami-sama. It's still a bit early for dinner, right?”

By the time Airi finished reading the email and asked this, Mikami had completed all the remaining tasks and smiled warmly.

“Yes, you're right.”

Seina, having finished organizing the daily necessities delivered to his room, sat down as if to test the feel of the brand-new chair.

“Whew… so that's it.”

Stretching his arms wide, Seina suddenly noticed the enormous window, as large as a small movie theater screen. Amane's house was located at the highest point on the island, so even from Seina's room, he could see the sea and the mainland.

“The view here is also quite spectacular, but that view was amazing.”

Seina pictured the view from the terrace of Nashisu. The crater-like landscape created by the impact of a large meteorite was a formation rarely seen in nature. The overwhelmingly unnatural scenery had the same impact as a gigantic building.

(Come to think of it, they called it “Washu's Pore”… Washu-san is the person at Tenchi-senpai's place, right…)

Seina paused for a moment, as if pondering something, then said, “Um… how do I activate it again? Oh, right, I haven't set up the shortcut yet.”

Seina took out his ID card and used it to activate the monitor. Thankfully, the basic knowledge needed for keyboard input had been installed as foundational knowledge during his initial memory formation the day he left Earth. While he couldn't quite touch-type yet, he displayed the necessary data with quick keystrokes.

“This is kind of moving, huh. Never thought I'd have my own computer. And it actually boots up… Huh? What's this?”

There was a folder he didn't recognize displayed.

“Ah, come to think of it, was this what Kenneth mentioned?”

Seina reached to open the folder, but a bad feeling stopped his hand.

(Better not… Knowing Kenneth, it's probably something porn-related… I'd love to see it, but it's definitely not a good idea while I'm here …)

If Kiriko ever caught him looking at something like that…

Seina recalled a similar situation—when he and Kai had looked at that erotic book Kai had gotten before.

(Come to think of it, the first time I got an adult book, I was caught by Aunt Tsukiko while looking at it with Kai… That guy, Kai, his emotions show on his face so clearly, Aunt Tsukiko could tell right away he was hiding something.)

—Oh, I see… Seina-chan's reached the age where he's interested in this sort of thing too.

(Aunt Tsukiko… She looked so sad back then… And then)

—Kai… Who did you get this from?

(She said that while squeezing his neck… I couldn't see Aunt Tsukiko's expression from behind, but Kai's face turned more and more ashen… He said it was the most terrifying thing he'd ever seen in his life…)

—Aaaaaaaaah, I'm so sorry Tsukiko-san, please forgive me~~~!

(After that, tremendous thumping sounds came from the living room for about ten minutes, accompanied by uncle's unceasing screams… Then, I didn't see uncle for about two years, did I?)

—Hey, Seina-chan…

(I remember Aunt Tsukiko coming to Kai's room after that… Oh yeah, he had already bolted, leaving me behind. As usual, I was too slow to escape… I was trembling.)

—Hey, Seina-chan… Don't be scared.

(Aunt Tsukiko gently hugged me as I trembled…)

—If Seina-chan… wants to see it…

(Huh? Come to think of it, if you want to see… what was she going to say? In the end, I was hugged so tightly against Aunt Tsukiko's chest, my face completely buried, I almost suffocated… and lost consciousness partway through, right?) Seina recalled the soft feel of her chest from that time, but the trauma of nearly suffocating came flooding back too.

"…Haa! Haa haa haa haa… Haa~~~…" Seina's breathing suddenly became ragged.

After taking a deep breath, he slowly calmed his breathing and wiped the sweat beading thickly on his forehead.

"Anyway, Kiriko-san has the exact same personality as Aunt Tsukiko, so if she ever found out…"

Even if there wasn't a specific pattern to the impact sounds, there was the example from earlier while shopping. More terrifying than being scolded was the indescribably awkward atmosphere that would surely follow. Probably, even if that situation happened, no one would come to his rescue… or rather, it was the kind of topic that made it difficult for anyone to help.

Overwhelmed by a tremendous sense of unease, Seina stopped thinking about it.

"Come to think of it, there are plenty of other women around… Anyway, I was supposed to look into Washu-san… Hmm, the search method was…"

The moment Seina typed Washu's name into the search bar, an overwhelming number of monitors sprang to life, filling the entire room.

"Whoa! Wh-what is this?!"

As he frantically tried to turn them off…

"Seina-kun, what's going on? The living room is covered in monitors!" Elma swam through the sea of screens to enter the room.

"Sorry, I was just trying to look something up…"

“Excuse me for a moment.”

She peered at Seina's main monitor, tapped the keyboard lightly, and all the monitors in the room instantly organized themselves.

“I set it to the most standard configuration for now, but feel free to customize it however you find easiest to use, Seina-kun.”

“Thanks, that's a big help.”

“Hmm… So you were looking into Hakubi Washu?”

“After seeing that view today… I got a little curious…”

“Well, she is the most famous person here at the Academy. You hear her name all the time. But researching her is tough if you're just going in blind. After all, she has fifteen thousand years of history.”

“F-Fifteen thousand years!?”

“She went missing five thousand years ago… so including that, it's twenty thousand years.”

Seina stared at Elma in utter astonishment as she casually mentioned an archaeological timescale, as if it were nothing.

“Is that person even human?”

“Oh, ordinary people live about a thousand years, you know. With today's latest technology, if you undergo special processing, you can live almost indefinitely. And since you've had Bio-Enhancement, Seina-kun, you'll be fine for two thousand years.”

“T-two thousand…” Seina was stunned by the sheer absurdity of the number. He searched for a figure that might make it feel even remotely real.

(Right… two thousand is almost the same as the Western calendar. So this is what Kiriko-san meant when she said you can't live a normal life anymore.)

It was at this moment that Seina felt, for the first time, that he was no longer an Earthling.

“Anxious?”

“Huh? Yeah… a little.”

“Kiriko-san can talk to you about it. After all, she's been through it too. But Seina-kun, you've come to this world now, so don't worry too much about it. Here, everyone around you has a similar lifespan.”

“I suppose so… But even so, Washu-san's figure of twenty thousand years still seems extraordinary…”

“Life extension technology only recently became widely available, but she was a Doctor of

Philosophy, the Academy's foremost scientist. From what I've heard, even back then, her technology was on a level that makes current civilian medical technology seem trivial. In fact, some of Hakubi Washu's former students are still alive today… Ah, I've found a suspicious folder!”

“Huh? Wh-what's that?!”

Before Seina could stop her, Elma had already opened the folder. Just as Seina had imagined, it was packed full of explicit video and image data.

“Well, well, I knew it♡” Elma grabbed Seina firmly by the scruff of his neck as he tried to escape and pulled him close.

“Th-that was given to me by a friend…”

“I know. There's no way Seina-kun, who just arrived in space, could have collected this much.”

“Um… so it's okay if I delete it, right?”

“Oh, don't worry about it. You're a perfectly normal boy, Seina-kun. You shouldn't suppress your natural desires.” Saying this, Elma tossed the folder into some kind of program and glanced briefly at Seina.

“Honestly, it'd be best if there was a woman to be your partner… but if a personal simulation will do, I wouldn't mind being your companion.”

“No, no, no, no! You really don't have to go that far!”

Elma's sultry expression as she said this made Seina's heart pound like a drum. His face flushed even redder, and sweat began pouring out in no time.

“Hmm… Well, Seina-kun is still a minor, and if Kiriko-san found out, she'd probably smash your head in.” Elma stuck out her tongue and laughed shyly just as a beep sounded from the monitor.

“What were you doing?” Released from his embarrassment, Seina wiped his sweat and peered at the monitor.

“Sorting through the contents of Seina-kun's Friendship Folder.”

“F-Friendship folder?”

“The male friendship folder.”

“Huh… So, what exactly is 'sorting'?”

“I do have a duty to protect and nurture Seina-kun, after all. I can't permit the use of inappropriate videos or personal data. Your friend seems to have some pretty deep interests, so I've placed protection on age-restricted content and anything I felt might be

premature.”

“Huh… That's fine, I guess… But was it really that intense?”

“I deleted the illegal simulated sex personal data, but the rest will have the protection lifted once Seina-kun reaches the appropriate viewing age. Oh, and one more thing…”

Elma launched the newly installed program. A three-dimensional image resembling a building appeared.

“This is part of the security system for this house. It shows where people are, so feel free to use it when you want to do something you don't want others to see.”

“……”

It was both appreciated and not appreciated. That slightly awkward consideration made Seina's face turn bright red again. Just as he was wondering whether to thank her…

“Seina, and Elma too if you're here, could you come to the living room for a moment?” Amane's voice came from the monitor, which had activated at just the right moment.

“Got it. Well then, Seina-kun, let's go… Oh, right. We got pretty sidetracked, but if you're interested in Hakubi Washu, I can tell you about a good search site later. After all, there's just so much information about her, if you search vaguely, you'd never have enough time.”

Leaving his room, Seina descended the stairs leading to the living room directly ahead. Hakuren and the others, along with Kiriko, were there, and Amane sat on the sofa. The sight of them standing in the spacious, quiet room bathed in the evening sun was almost surreal.

Amane's house, while modern in style by Earth standards, possessed such spaciousness and opulent construction that the presence of women in maid uniforms felt entirely natural. Hakuren and the others wore maid uniforms made of high-quality Juraian silk with natural ease, standing elegantly and perfectly still. The only regret was Amane's casual attire, but her beauty and refined upbringing shone through in her bearing, giving her the dignified presence befitting a wealthy mistress.

(Ah… but…)

Only Kiriko, looking distinctly displeased, stood out starkly from the atmosphere.

“Seina, these are the housekeeper girls who will be taking care of our house. From left to right: Hakuren, Gyokuren, Karen, and Suiren.”

“We look forward to serving you, Seina-sama, Elma-sama.”

They bowed respectfully toward the two of them.

“Wow~, they're all stunning beauties, aren't they? With us included, you're surrounded by so many gorgeous women, Seina! How lucky you are!” As if to ease Seina's tension, or perhaps to shatter the fantastical atmosphere, Amane laughed heartily and patted Seina's

back repeatedly.

“Usually, it's the not-so-pretty ones who say that, so you know it's a joke… But when it's actually true, how are you supposed to judge it… Right, Kiriko-san?”

Elma, clearly determined not to repeat her shopping mishap, approached the sullen Kiriko, trying to soothe her anger. As if sensing her intention, Kiriko sighed softly, resigned, and closed her eyes.

“Don't get any funny ideas just because someone called you 'Master,' Seina-kun.”

Amane, too, had intended it as a lighthearted joke. But…

“I don't mind.”

“Huh?!”

All eyes froze on Gyokuren, the speaker.

It was the worst line at the worst possible moment… but just before Kiriko exploded, Karen and the other two had pinned Gyokuren down.

“Ah, um… I meant it's fine to start work immediately.”

Hakuren and the others, feigning calm, began dragging Gyokuren slowly toward the kitchen in an attempt to escape. But despite their efforts, Kiriko, her face expressionless, grabbed Gyokuren's face with a firm, eagle-like grip. The force of that hand was like the jaws of a large carnivorous beast sinking into its prey.

“Kya!”

The force and pressure of Kiriko's arms, like a truck charging at them, made Hakuren and the others jump back and distance themselves from Gyokuren.

“Well, let's get started. Amane, I'll leave the rest to you.” Kiriko said with a smile, and without even looking at Hakuren and the others, she dragged Gyokuren away.

“No, no! Not the face!” Gyokuren's voice, which sounded almost pleased, carried an oddly heartbreaking quality. Then, before the stunned gazes of Seina and the others, she vanished through the door like prey being dragged into a den.

“Surprising… She didn't seem like the type to make such careless remarks.” Amane, her tension easing now that Kiriko was gone, said this to Hakuren.

“We will be very careful, so please forgive us, Amane-sama.”

“It's fine. It's interesting. More importantly, I imagine things will get tough from here on out, but I'll be counting on you.”

“Likewise. I know I may fall short in some ways, but I look forward to working with you.”

Hakuren and the other two bowed deeply, then followed Kiriko and Gyokuren out of the living room.

“So, Seina, you'll be training now… What's wrong?”

Amane stared in the direction Gyokuren had been taken, looking curiously at Seina and Elma, who had puzzled expressions on their faces.

“Close call, close call.”

Seina frantically wiped away the sweat pouring down his face, while Elma desperately stroked her bristling tail.

“What was dangerous?”

“Nothing… it's nothing. Anyway, Amane-san. I need to get something ready, so please wait a moment.”

Elma opened a small trunk placed in the corner of the living room and activated a monitor and keyboard. Inside the trunk were metal spheres about the size of golf balls. They floated into the air and moved to the four corners of the floor and the four corners of the ceiling.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. We can start now.”

“Amane-san, training… What exactly are we doing?” Watching the metal spheres scatter in all directions, Seina stiffened with tension.

“I've prepared something nice for you, young man. I hope you like it.” Amane pointed to the rectangular table in front of the sofa in a tone like a mother talking to a baby.

Then, the table, which had been completely seamless, disassembled into small rectangular and square pieces.

“Wh-what is this?”

“Your training equipment.”

“Training equipment? …Its kind of… looks like building blocks.” Seina picked up one of the pieces scattered on the floor. It was hard, with a metallic sheen, and surprisingly light despite its appearance.

“Correct.”

About four meters away from where the blocks lay, a translucent image resembling a castle appeared.

“Assemble these parts over there according to the instructions.”

“Huh…” Seina, who had imagined some intense training, looked at Amane with a slightly deflated expression.

“Well, give it a try. Alright, starting with fifty percent load.”

Gyokuren lay in the housekeepers' lounge, cooling the cheek Kiriko had grabbed.

“I thought my skull was going to split open…”

“Are you an idiot? Of course Kiriko-sama would get angry if you said something like that there.” Karen suppressed a laugh as she observed Gyokuren resting with half her face hidden by a wet towel, surrounded by them all. It felt like a deathbed scene. It was a bit irreverent, but it was rare to see Gyokuren beaten up like this.

“I didn't mean to… Heh heh, but seeing Seina-sama's face just got me all worked up…”

“Ugh!”

Even with half her face hidden… no, precisely because of it, Gyokuren's lips and words felt more sensual than usual. Karen felt a tinge of terror at the sight of those seductively moving lips.

“Damn it, Kiriko-sama will kill you someday.”

“……Ah, speaking of which… Kiriko-sama's hands, those pure white hands like a beast's jaws…”

“A beast's jaws? …Ah, it certainly had the force to bite into your face.”

“Back when I was forced to watch my friend get eaten in the castle's underground labyrinth…”

“Wait! What are you talking about?!” Karen flinched and braced herself.

“So, the story about that giant albino snake eating my friend. …Sigh… She was such a cute girl, and then half her face was just ripped off… That snake's mouth back then felt just like Kiriko-sama's hand.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaah, how many times do I have to tell you I don't want to hear your old stories?” Karen, who hated this kind of story the most, fled to the corner of the room and covered her ears.

“Just remembered it, heh.”

“That's exactly why we're talking about it—so you don't remember such things and don't anger Kiriko-sama!”

“Karen's right… That was a rather careless thing for Gyokuren to say.” Hakuren said with his eyes closed, suppressing her fear just like Karen.

“Yes. Seina-sama's expression… I think something is subtly throwing off my senses.”

“A bias in probability, huh… It's impressive that Gyokuren would say something like that.”

Among the four of them, Gyokuren stood out in many ways. Of course, there were monsters like Seto and Washu who were even more formidable, but Gyokuren's words carried weight, having known them the longest.

“Gyokuren… I'll just say it, but that doesn't mean you should intentionally cause trouble.” Noticing Gyokuren's faint smile, Suiren said, which was rare for her.

“Of course I'll try my best. I understand how dangerous it is to provoke Kiriko-sama.”

“Trying… Listen, while provoking Kiriko-sama is one thing, more importantly, we absolutely cannot let the others discover our true nature.”

“Karen… Seto-sama said 'as much as possible'. Not 'absolutely'. At the very least, Amane-sama is already fully aware.”

“That person seems sharp, after all.”

“Heh, that's true.”

“Suiren and Hakuren… Seriously, this isn't something to laugh about… But seeing Amane-sama up close again, I have to say… she really is a stunningly beautiful person, isn't she?” Karen flushed slightly and sighed softly.

Hakuren and Suiren nodded in agreement.

“Her type is quite different, but she's on par with Gyokuren… Plus, she seems like a nice person too.” Karen said this with as much sarcasm as possible, as if to get revenge for what she had said earlier.

“You think so? Then you're mistaken. Right now, she might have some dissatisfaction, but she's content enough that it doesn't show. If she ever truly craves something, that person… she'll become a terrifying demon.”

“!!”

The sheer pressure of Gyokuren's words made Karen and the others feel a chill run down their spines, their hair standing on end. Cold sweat poured down their backs like waterfalls. This was, of course, payback for Karen's earlier snide remark.

“Though she seems to have a pretty wide tolerance range, so it probably won't come to that.”

“……That's what you call having a good personality!”

“Hehe, that's true. ……Oh, Hakuren, where are you going?” Gyokuren called out to Hakuren, who was heading for the door with Suiren in tow, as if fleeing.

“It's time for me to start my duties.”

“I’m babysitting Gyokuren again?”

Though she said that, in the end, calm reflection led her to conclude that the pairings of Karen and Gyokuren, and Hakuren and Suiren, were the most balanced. As usual, Karen ran the simulation in her head for about ten seconds, and when she reached her usual conclusion, she bowed her head in resignation and sighed deeply.

“Alright then, Karen, I'll leave it to you. Our future depends on this mission.”

“Yeah, I know.”

In the living room, Seina's face was covered in beads of sweat as he assembled a castle nearly as tall as himself. If he gripped the blocks too tightly, they shattered into liquid and returned to their original places. But if he gripped them too weakly, he couldn't hold them properly, and even if he managed to hold them, then came the task of stacking them.

“Ugh…”

Every muscle in his body screamed at the delicate task, not just his hands and feet. It felt like carving intricate sculptures with a huge, heavy axe. Plus, even just walking a little required conscious effort to feel the friction between his feet and the floor, or he'd slip like walking on ice or jump up unexpectedly.

“That's it, that's it. You're doing great. No need to stress—the goal isn't to assemble everything perfectly.” Amane sat leisurely on the sofa, reading a magazine while watching Seina out of the corner of her eye.

It hardly qualified as proper instruction, but then again, having someone stand right beside him giving intense, passionate coaching would only create awkward pressure and make him rush.

“How's it going?” Kiriko quietly entered the living room, careful not to distract Seina, and peered at Elma’s monitor.

“Seina-kun is doing great. At this rate, I think he'll get used to it soon.”

“I'm not worried about that. More importantly, what about the probability fluctuations?”

“We've only just started, and we need more data before we can say anything definitive… But honestly, Seina-kun's ability to handle probability anomalies is impressive.”

“What do you mean?”

“As expected, a bug occurred in the building blocks, causing the parts' pressure destruction values to fluctuate wildly. Seina-kun seems to be correcting them unconsciously… Look.”

The pressure destruction value of the part Seina tried to pick up showed an abnormally low reading. But Seina avoided it and picked up a different part instead.

“Just a coincidence?”

“Of course, we don't have enough data yet to conclude that, but the probability of him not picking up a part with fluctuating pressure destruction values is currently 100%. Or rather, it's even higher than that…”

The pressure destruction value of the part Seina started carrying dropped sharply, and the part shattered.

“That's how it goes.”

“Come to think of it, during the dorm escape, he avoided my intentional traps too. Haa… But at this rate, it'll never be completed. Shouldn't we fix the program bug instead?”

“This is just training.”

“Ugh!”

“Besides, this bug is creating just the right amount of fluctuation, which is actually beneficial for Seina-kun's training.”

“I, I need to tidy up Seina-chan's room. He'll need a change of clothes, right?” Before digging herself into a deeper hole, Kiriko quickly fled the scene and dashed up the stairs to Seina's room.

(Kiriko-san… she really is adorable.) Elma smiled at her retreating figure.

“Ah, Amane-san. Seina-kun's muscle fatigue value has started rising rapidly. If you plan to continue, please take a break first.”

“Right… then let's call it a day for today.” As Amane spoke, the building blocks liquefied and transformed back into the table.

“Ah, thank you.” Feeling the load on his clothes again, Seina collapsed onto the floor and sprawled out flat on his back in the living room.

“Well, the worst part is usually just the first three days or so. After that, the sensation of using your body should feel just like before.”

“Haa… But my whole body feels disjointed, and I have no idea what to do…”

“This isn't rehab or strength training. Take you, Seina-kun. Before the Bio-Enhancement, your grip strength test showed just under sixty kilograms, but you could also hold soft things without crushing them, right? That means you were controlling a range from zero to sixty. Think of it as that range just expanding a bit.”

“Now that you mention it, it does sound fairly simple… But if my strength increases, even minor actions could injure someone or break things…”

“We set several limiters in the brain during the nervous system enhancement, so accidents are extremely rare. More importantly, let's get that massage started right away.” Amane grabbed Seina's arm and dragged him along.

“Huh? If it's a massage, we could do it here…”

“You're sweaty, aren't you? Come on, this way.”

“…No way!” Realizing where he was being taken, Seina started struggling to escape. But his limbs, more exhausted than he'd realized, wouldn't move as he wanted.

Helped by Elma, Amane dragged him away, leaving Seina helpless.

“Oh Seina-chan…” Kiriko stared at Seina's room with an exasperated look.

Most of the furniture and household items bought for him remained piled near the entrance. Only the bare necessities were arranged within easy reach around the desk and bed, filling a roughly six-tatami-mat space.

“It looks like some kind of animal nest. …Well, I guess I understand how he feels.” Kiriko smiled wryly as she looked around the large room again.

She picked up several packages from the packaging placed at the entrance and began walking towards the back of the room.

After unpacking his belongings, Kiriko began to efficiently make the bed, laying the sheets down snugly, putting covers on the pillows, and arranging the blankets and comforter. Then she spread out his brand-new pajamas and looked at them with a gleeful expression.

—Just like a newlywed wife.

If Amane or Elma were here, they would surely say the same thing. But they weren't here to tease Kiriko. Right now, this was Kiriko's space alone.

“Heh.”

Since elementary school, Kiriko had taken care of most household chores and looked after her younger brother and Seina in place of her perpetually busy mother. Her personal time

was limited to studying at school and at home. With no time to play with friends or pursue her own hobbies, seeing Seina happy was Kiriko's greatest reason for living.

“Yeah, it looks more like a room now.”

Finally, she adjusted the lighting, so only soft spotlights illuminated the area around the bed. As Kiriko gazed at the space with satisfaction, tears welled up in her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

“Oh, what?”

Only then did Kiriko realize she was crying. Suddenly, like a puppet whose strings had snapped, she collapsed to her knees.

“Why am I crying… Why…?”

The scene before her eyes made Kiriko uneasy. Suddenly, she remembered the day she left Earth and went into space.

As she and Minaho watched Earth grow smaller from Mikagami's bridge, Kiriko had felt a great sense of liberation. It stemmed from the relief her mother had pointed out—the relief of escaping Seina's ill fortune.

“Anxious?” Minaho asked, seeing Kiriko’s expression. She then gently took her hand.

(Anxious? …Yes, I was anxious. Because back then, I believed I had to protect Earth… That was the price… no, the excuse I used to escape from Seina-chan.)

To dispel that anxiety, Kiriko trained relentlessly under Seto. To learn everything as quickly as possible, she volunteered for and actively pursued the accelerated space curriculum.

—To protect Earth and Seina from the threats coming from space—

(Yes. I worked so hard Minaho-sama even worried about me.)

Kiriko's anxiety began to fade as she gained more and more skills that she was satisfied with and became accustomed to her job. But at the same time, a sense of loss began to grow inside her, as if a huge hole had opened up inside her. In an attempt to fill that void, she enjoyed herself with friends, bought things she wanted, and even dated men…

(But it never truly satisfied me… Of course not… All that hard work was just self-indulgence.)

A vague sense of unease filled the gaping hole, and with no way to deal with it, Kiriko returned to Earth to make sure that Seina was safe. However, this was only a way for her to justify her decision to go into space. She was trying to convince herself that she had made the right choice. Although this made the unease go away, the sense of loss did not go away. In fact, it only grew stronger every time she returned to Earth.

And on the day Seina came to space, what Kiriko felt was terror. Of course, there was fear for Seina's safety, but even greater was the terror of returning to her old life.

(Seriously, what a horrible woman… Ugh!)

Kiriko, nearly crushed by self-loathing, lifted her face like a drowning person reaching for air. A space illuminated by light burst into view.

“Haah, haah, haah…….!!”

Amidst her ragged breathing, tears spilled down Kiriko's face once more as she gazed upon that space.

(So that's it! …That's what it was.)

Like an insect drawn to light, Kiriko staggered toward the spot, collapsed onto the bed, and began to cry, stifling her sobs.

(I wanted to go back. I loved it there.)

Kiriko realized that the space floating in the dimness was the missing piece that filled the huge hole inside her.

What Kiriko truly feared more than having escaped Seina's ill fortune was the fact that she wanted to return to the very place she had hurt. She couldn't forgive herself for standing before Seina—for the disgust she felt toward herself for running away only to realize its importance and try to return, and for her betrayal of Seina.

——You're so serious, you know. And clumsy.

——That's why you don't need to worry. You just need to think about your own happiness.

Realizing the true meaning behind Seto and her mother's words, Kiriko cried.

—Teaching a little bird that doesn't know how to fly.

That was supposed to be her atonement to Seina. But for Kiriko, life with Seina wasn't atonement—it was desire. It wasn't for Seina's sake, but for her own.

But that only deepened her sense of debt to Seina, shattering the very reason she had built for herself to stay by Seina's side.

“…What should I do… I want to stay here.” Kiriko murmured while crying, but no one answered her. She didn't even have the courage to confide in anyone.

“What should I do…?”

After crying for a while, perhaps feeling a little clearer, Kiriko slowly sat up. Then she noticed her own face reflected in the window.

“What a terrible face. … Hey, what should I do? What should I do?” Kiriko spoke to her right hand, then noticed the tear- and makeup-stained duvet cover.

“Oh no!”

Kiriko jumped up, pulled a spare cover from the storage bag, and made the bed again. Once that was done, she started fixing her tear-soaked makeup.

“…Right. No matter how I think about it, there's only one choice after all.”

—To teach a little bird that doesn't know how to fly.

Having made that decision, she had to stay by Seina's side. She couldn't make the mistake of running away again.

“But I have to draw a line… Once Seina-chan can manage without me, then…”

Kiriko knew this conclusion would make Seto and Tsukiko say the same thing. But unless she did this, Kiriko's feelings wouldn't settle.

“Right! It's about time to prepare dinner.”

Kiriko slapped her cheeks, took a deep breath to shake off her gloom, grabbed a change of clothes from the luggage by the entrance, and trotted out of Seina's room.

“Oh, I wonder if today's curriculum is over already?”

Descending the stairs to the lower floor, Kiriko noticed Seina and the others weren't in the living room.

“I finally got his clothes… Oh!!”

Kiriko grabbed his change of clothes and ran off in the direction Seina had been dragged.

The greenhouse-like bathing area was filled with many tropical plants, and the walls and ceiling were mostly made of glass. Even though it was inside the bathroom, there was no condensation, and the night sky and stars were clearly visible.

“…But it's strange, isn't it? Even though there should be a huge bias in probability, Seina-kun's abnormal probability is much lower than expected… No, it's almost nonexistent?” Elma was soaking in one of the several bathtubs that was placed a little higher than the floor, her face thoughtful as she looked back and forth between the monitor and Seina, who had been dragged into the bathroom.

“I can do my own massage, so please, I beg you, spare me!”

Seina, a towel wrapped around his waist, desperately defended his last line of defense while pleading with Amane. But frankly, that was counterproductive against Amane, who was clearly intent on undressing him.

“You can't give a proper massage by yourself, can you? Don't worry about it, this is part of my job.”

Looking strangely pleased, Amane tried to peel off Seina's towel.

“Then can't I just keep my clothes on?!”

“Do you bathe fully clothed on Earth?”

“Well, we do take them off, but if you get a massage after the bath, it's the same thing…”

“You saw everything during Bio-Enhancement, so there's no need to be embarrassed now, right?”

“I was unconscious back then… Hey, Amane-san, you're doing this on purpose! Besides, it was me who got seen, not you!”

“We're going to be living together for a while now, so it's fine if Seina sees me.”

“……”

Hearing this as if it were a completely obvious thing, Seina was left deep in thought.

(Am I the weird one making such a fuss? Elma-san just walked in without batting an eye… Is that just normal in space?)

“Well, for now, warm up your body.”

Seizing Seina's momentary lapse, Amane snatched the towel from him and kicked him into the largest bathtub. Then she shed the robe she'd been wearing and followed him in.

Milky-white lukewarm water, slightly warmer than body temperature, enveloped Seina's body. With momentum from being kicked, he hit the bath's floor. Seina stiffened instinctively, but the floor was soft, with an elasticity like a balloon.

“Ugh!”

That unreliable sensation made Seina's limbs tangle. Clutching the nearest soft object in search of air, he surfaced.

“Haah, haah… Ah!”

The thing Seina had clung to was Amane's naked body. As he frantically tried to get away, he suddenly put too much force into his legs, causing them to cramp. He immediately relaxed, avoiding the cramp, but in that moment, Amane grabbed him.

“There, sit down calmly.”

Amane pulled Seina close, cradling his neck under her arm, and lowered him onto the seat-like area within the bath.

“Relax your body and take slow, deep breaths.”

Amane's gentle voice and the milky-white water obscuring the bath's interior helped Seina

regain some composure. Yet the awareness that Amane was naked beside him made even the touch of water flowing when he moved feel like an electric shock.

Seina slowly moved a little away from Amane.

“Oh dear, if you're this tense, what's the point of taking a bath?”

Amane smoothly drew her hand out of the water and held it before Seina's eyes. Then, a black, membrane-like substance spread across Amane's hand, covering her up to her chest.

“This should make you feel a little less embarrassed, right?”

Amane stood before Seina, looking slightly annoyed, then roughly grabbed his right foot and began massaging it.

“… I'm sorry.”

“Which are you apologizing for? Getting a massage? Or being embarrassed to bathe with us?”

“But… I…”

“Just kidding. You were being so shy, I was just teasing you a little.” As she said that, Amane's massage techniques became gentler.

“Maybe because I used to work as a model, I don't really mind people seeing me naked when I think of it as part of my job. It's not uncommon for me to be completely naked when getting measured or changing clothes… Ah, just stay there and don't move.”

The moment Amane finished speaking, the area where Seina was sitting began to rise. She pressed down on Seina's shoulder as he reflexively tried to stand, handing him a towel. The bottom of the tub was wide enough for Seina to lie down, and it rose up nearly to the water's surface.

“Now lie face down.”

As Amane instructed, Seina lay face down carefully, making sure the towel didn't slip, and the raised area changed shape again to fit his body.

Perhaps thanks to the chiropractic and careful massage, Seina's limbs, which had felt like lead, began to feel surprisingly light. Lost in that comfort and exhaustion, Seina fell asleep. Elma approached him quietly.

“Oh my, Seina-kun seems to have fallen asleep? …Whoa! Looking more closely, Seina-kun's body is covered in old scars.”

Seina's back bore countless scars all over it, including more than one or two fairly large wounds that could have been life-threatening. Amane traced each one with her finger, her expression pained.

“Did Kiriko see Seina come home with all these injuries?”

“If that's the case… then maybe it's no wonder Kiriko-san gets so worked up about him.”

“Even so… Seina's skin is so beautiful and has such fine texture.”

“That's a sudden change of topic. Weren't we talking about scars?”

“The night before the entrance ceremony, I was drinking with Kiriko… I overslept and could have been late, so I quickly jumped into the shower pod with her. Her skin was really smooth and beautiful too.”

“Ah, Amane-san… Could it be?” Elma gave Amane a questioning look as she spoke with a somewhat dreamy expression. Despite her looks, Amane had never been linked to any romantic rumors involving men.

“I'm not into that, I prefer men. That's why right now… hehe, I'm feeling kinda naughty ♡”

Understanding the meaning behind Elma's words, Amane flatly denied it, then began slowly stroking Seina's back seductively.

“Hehe, seeing him sleeping defenselessly is certainly a bit arousing. Seina-kun has great muscles that were built naturally, not intentionally. Even during the bio-enhancement, we didn't have to make any adjustments to his overall balance.”

“Too bad he’s not on his back.”

“No, no, a man's back is where it's at.”

Amane and Elma gradually grew restless with mere stroking alone. They began rubbing their cheeks against him and pressing their chests against him, escalating their actions as if competing.

“But if Kiriko saw us here, we'd be in big trouble.”

“Hehe. We know, but we can't stop… Oh?”

Elma noticed Seina's body suddenly tense up. Having his back fussed over by two women, being fiddled with here and there, and having something soft pressed against him—even if he was exhausted and asleep, that would wake anyone up. Realizing his situation, Seina stiffened with tension.

“…Wh-what are you doing?”

“Massage♡”

When Amane and Elma answered Seina's question at the same time, the three of them sensed an incredible murderous intent and turned toward the entrance to the bathhouse. Their faces froze in fear.

“Haa haa haa haa…”

Kiriko, who must have sprinted there at full speed, was drenched in sweat, her skin flushed, hair disheveled, eyes wide open, looking like a **Namahage** demon. **(TN: Figures from a Japanese New Year's Eve tradition on the Oga Peninsula where young men dress as demonic gods to visit homes, frightening children and admonishing adults about laziness to bring good luck, good harvests, and blessings for the coming year.)**

“…Wh-what’s up Kiriko? You're late… Well? How about you join us in giving Seina a massage…” Feeling a chill as if the temperature in the bathroom had suddenly dropped, Amane said nonchalantly, desperately tried to appear calm.

At that moment, Kiriko's figure flickered for a moment like a mayfly.

“!”

Amane instantly sensed danger and pulled away from Seina. The very next moment, something whizzed past Amane's face with incredible force.

Gyaiiin, BAM!

First came the sound of Kiriko's thrown wooden bucket striking Amane's Guardian. Next came the sound of it hitting Seina squarely in the face.

The bucket, possessing enough force to materialize Amane's Guardian, had been hurled without any warning. Without Amane's exceptionally sharp instincts, it would have certainly hit her.

Silently, Amane and Elma stared blankly for a moment at Kiriko, who had slammed the door shut and stormed out.

Clang, clang-clang.

The bucket, having struck Seina and bounced off him, fell to the floor after a long moment in the air, making a loud clatter. The sound snapped Amane and Elma back to their senses, and they both looked toward Seina simultaneously.

“Hey, hey, Seina! Are you okay!?”

Amane lifted Seina, who was still slumped face-down, while Elma immediately checked the spot where the bucket had hit.

“Looks like it's okay.”

“Really? My Guardian activated!”

Seina lay unconscious, a perfect wood grain pattern etched across his face.

“That Guardian must have slowed the wooden bucket down. Just some bruises and a mild concussion. Plus, he’s completed Bio-Enhancement.”

“I don't know if that's good luck or bad luck.” Amane gently laid Seina back down on the bathtub ledge.

“But this is a problem, isn't it? What should we do?”

“What should we do? Honestly, I'm just relieved she left so quickly. I don’t want to think about what could have happened next.”

“Hmm… True, I genuinely thought I was going to be killed. But we can't just stay like this forever…”

“Elma, do you have the guts to go out that door?” Amane pointed at the door by the bathtub entrance with a sullen expression.

“…It feels like walking into a dense jungle at night, where wild beasts lurk.”

“This time, she probably won't let us off so easily…” Amane frowned in thought, then noticed the visitor's bell ringing in the distance and her face lit up.

“A visitor… Hmm, is it a savior, or a demon bringing new misfortune?”

“Huh?”

“The visitors who can come here are limited, aren't they?”

“I see.”

As Amane and Elma exchanged glances and nodded, Seina, who had been unconscious beneath them, regained consciousness.

“…Ugh… Uuuuugh”

“You're awake? Alright, let's go!”

Supporting Seina on both sides, Amane and Elma began walking briskly toward the bathhouse exit.

Kiriko, who threw the bucket at Seina, was filled with immense self-loathing.

(What am I doing?! Who am I to say anything about what Seina-chan does with whom? But Amane and Elma clearly went too far! Ahhhhhhh, but that's no excuse for doing something as violent as throwing a bucket at them!… And…) Kiriko's momentum suddenly faltered, and she collapsed to the ground. (And it even hit Seina-chan…)

Just as she was about to be crushed by the super gravity known as self-loathing, she heard the doorbell ring from the front door.

“Ah…”

Kiriko reflexively stood up and headed for the front door. When she arrived, Hakuren and Suiren had already greeted their guests.

“Ah, Airi-sama! And Mikami-sama?”

“Oh, Kiriko-chan, I'm home. I'll go prepare dinner now♡” With that, Airi quickly walked past Kiriko and dashed towards the kitchen.

“Oh my~. It feels like a wake, doesn't it?” Airi calmly ate her soba noodles while surveying the scene in the dining room.

While Kiriko stood dumbfounded, Airi took over the kitchen and, with Hakuren and Suiren as her assistants, boiled soba and udon noodles, heated the prepared dishes from Nashisu, and prepared the table.

“Why is Airi-sama here?” Kiriko glared at Airi in disapproval, but she was the only one who was bothered by Airi's visit.

Amane and Elma were happy that the bath incident had been put to rest.

“Oh, I brought some soba and udon noodles as a housewarming gift, so that must be quite a complaint. And these are the highest quality items from Funaho-sama, who sent them specially to Seina-kun through Minaho. Ah, thank you.” Airi said as she took a sip from the teacup of sake that Hakuren had brought her.

“Phew… soba noodles go really well with sake.”

“Your kindness is greatly appreciated, but why is Mikami-sama here?”

In this case, “why” meant why didn't she stop Airi.

“Ho ho ho, the sake was sent to me.”

Kiriko, understanding Minaho's intent from Mikami's single remark, fell silent. Whether stopped or ignored, Airi would eventually show up anyway. Better this than risking her bad mood, letting her stress build up, and having her arrive in a volatile state.

“Even so, it seems like it's going to be tough from the very first day, Seina-kun.”

In stark contrast to Airi, Mikami was elegantly sipping sake from a cut-glass cup. She glanced at Seina, still bearing the marks from the bucket Kiriko had thrown.

“Eh? No, this is…” Seina quickly covered his face, and Kiriko turned bright red and looked down.

Seeing this, Airi puffed out her cheeks in displeasure. “Tch, looks like fun… Maybe I should just move in here too.”

“You shouldn't disturb the young ones, Airi-sama.”

“I'm still young too!”

“Sitting cross-legged and gulping sake from a teacup doesn't exactly scream 'young' to me.” Mikami pointed out.

Airi quickly put her feet down, took a deep breath, and began eating her soba with an elegant demeanor.

(Wow…)

Seina was surprised at how the atmosphere in the room had suddenly changed just by that one comment.

The dining hall, with its long, narrow shape, pearl-white pillars lining the walls, and glass panels reaching up to the high ceiling, had an almost temple-like feel. Add to that the furnishings were reminiscent of a top-tier restaurant, the atmospheric lighting, and the beautiful maids standing by. Then there was Academy Chairwoman Airi, Academy Principal Mikami from the prestigious Kuramitsu family, former top model Amane from a distinguished lineage, Airi's secretary Elma, and Kiriko—a member of the Imperial Family of Jurai, the Masaki clan.

(I feel so out of place here…) Seina felt uncomfortable, as if he were the only child at a wake.

“Hey, Seina, you have to eat properly.” Amane, keenly sensing Seina's mood, said in a bright tone.

“That's right. Eating soba noodles quietly can really make your shoulders stiff.” Airi glanced at Mikami and, as if to spite her, began to slurp her soba noodles loudly.

“Hohoho, I don't remember telling you how to eat soba noodles.”

“Whew…” The atmosphere instantly relaxed. Seina let out a sigh of relief and resumed eating.

“Well, anyway, today is like a private family gathering for Seina-kun, so let's not be too formal.”

At those words, Seina looked at Airi in surprise.

“Family… gathering?”

“Ideally, we would have done this before the entrance ceremony, but the pirate incident delayed your arrival, and then there was all that commotion, right? But despite all the chaos, the Academy's turmoil is settling down for the better, and GP Academy should be back to normal in a few days. Well, today is sort of Seina-kun's official celebration for entering the Academy.”

“Welcome to GP Academy, Yamada Seina-kun.”

“Ah, thank you. Airi-san, Principal Mikami.”

Seina stood up and bowed deeply. His voice was slightly nasal, perhaps from the tears welling up. He had received many kind words at the Academy before, but hearing them formally spoken in what could be considered a private setting made him feel even happier.

Applause erupted from everyone.

“Blessings upon the future of this young man standing at the starting line.” Airi gracefully sipped the sake from her teacup.

“……”

Everyone looked at her with a look of respect… but…

“Aaah, Airi's sooo drunk. Let me stay in Seina-kun's room, please♡”

An hour later, after devouring all the food and emptying the sake barrel, Airi was sprawled across the living room sofa, leaning against Seina.

“I took my eyes off you for a moment and look at this mess!”

“Honestly, Airi-sama, your concentration is on par with a child's.”

“I knew this would happen…”

Amane, Elma, and Kiriko looked down at Airi, utterly exasperated.

“Ho ho ho, I'll be accompanying you to Seina-kun's room, so don't worry.”

“Haa… In that case… Eh? Why Mikami-sama? Why must you go to Seina-chan's room?”

“Mikami-sama is staying in Seina's room too!?”

“I suppose I didn't explain myself clearly. To be precise, it's not that I have business with Seina-kun, but rather with the NB that was issued to Seina-kun.”

“NB?”

“Seina-kun, you haven't properly activated it, have you? I'm going to adjust that. Also, for security reasons, please refrain from entering Seina-kun's room.”

With strength belied by her age, Mikami tore Airi away from Seina and dragged her away by the scruff of her neck, like a kitten.

“Now, all of you, please stop here.” Mikami said to Kiriko and the others who had followed her into the hallway, then closed the door and locked it.

“Huh, it's actually pretty tidy in here.” Airi staggered to her feet and looked around the room.

“Kiriko-san did it…”

“Yay!” Without waiting for Seina's reply, Airi dashed off and dove onto Seina's bed like she was jumping into a pool.

“Hey, you! Hurry up!”

And this time, it wasn't a joke or a gag—she was dead serious! With a sultry voice that was genuinely husky, she beckoned Seina over in a sweet way.

“Seina-kun, where is NB?”

“Ah, over here.”

Mikami and Seina didn't look at Airi at all, hurrying straight to where NB was kept.

“Hey! Don't ignore me, at least give me a little pushback… Heh heh heh, pushback? You're such a pervert, Seina-kun.” Pounding the futon, Airi rolled nimbly across the bed.

“Since Airi-sama seems utterly useless, I'll handle the adjustments.”

“Principal Mikami will?”

“I have some knowledge too.”

Taking the NB out of its paulownia wood box, Mikami turned on the keyboard and began operating it with quick finger movements. In an instant, multiple monitors sprang to life around NB.

“Now, this is the only part I need Airi-sama's help with… Airi-sama, please wake up.”

“sleepy…” Exhausted from her one-woman comedy routine, Airi remained lying on her back on the bed.

“Well, I suppose we have no choice. Seina-kun, please support Airi-sama.”

At Mikami's instruction, Seina reluctantly supported Airi's limp upper body from behind, cradling her.

“Oh my ~, Seina-kun, you're so bold… Hehehe.”

Airi relaxed her body and leaned against Seina. Her body slid down, and the hands that had

been supporting her stomach moved closer to her chest. Finally, Seina could feel Airi's ample breasts resting on his arms.

“Airi-san, don't lean on me so much. Please put some strength into your body.”

“If you don't kiss me, I won't let you go~” Airi closed her eyes and pushed her lips toward Seina.

“Principal Mikami, do something!”

“It's just going to be a hassle if she keeps fussing. Go ahead and do it. Kiriko-san isn't here anyway. Ho ho ho.”

“No way—”

Looking at Seina’s confused expression, she tapped her own forehead with her finger. Hesitantly, Seina gave Airi a light kiss on the forehead.

“Hmm?” Airi opened her eyes, looking displeased. But seeing Seina's face flush bright red, she seemed slightly satisfied. She gathered strength in her previously slumped body and raised her upper body.

When Airi placed both hands on the activated monitor plate, the body scan began.

“Shōshō Shōjōji, Shōjōji's garden is, tsu~tsu, Moonlit Night, come out, come out, come out, everyone~!” Airi suddenly began singing “Shōjōji no Tanukibayashi.” **(TN: Children’s song from Shōjōji Temple, Kisarazu, Chiba, 1925)**

“Wh-what is this?”

“Quiet. It's the voice authentication to disable protection.” Mikami covered his mouth and whispered to the startled Seina.

—Beep!

As Airi finished singing, NB's protection was lifted with an electronic beep.

“Leave the rest to me.”

Airi closed her eyes again, her body going limp as she leaned against Seina.

“Ah, Seina-kun. By the way, it's Shōjōji, not 'virgin masturbation'… Heh heh heh.”

(……Feels like I've been handed a bomb with the fuse lit.)

Praying Airi wouldn't say anything more, Seina looked at the glass door leading to the balcony. His gaze shifted to the window, where the beautiful starry sky and moonlight reflected through the gaps in the dark silhouettes of trees, revealing the sparkling sea below.

(I might as well just go there…)

Seina's stress made him want to do something inappropriate, something that he would never normally consider. However he hesitated to illegally dump something as dangerous as nuclear waste in this beautiful natural environment, and looked at Mikami with pleading eyes.

“Ho ho ho, it's just a simple task from here on out. Please bear with me a little longer.”

Mikami probably found dealing with Airi troublesome too. She gently refused Seina's wish and began working with fluid keystrokes.

“Whoa…” It was so impressive that he couldn't help but gasp.

“You'd be dead wrong to think Grandma can't do anything. Principal Mikami used to pick fights with Seto-sama back in the day—she was a real troublemaker.”

“Huh!?”

“That was back when I was a naughty kid. I was young once too.”

It was a voice and gaze so alluring, it made Airi—now leaning against Seina—seem like a child, utterly unlike what you'd expect from an old woman.

(So she's not an ordinary person either.)

Seina stared at Mikami in utter shock… Then, Mikami's fluid finger movements stopped abruptly.

“… Seina-kun, honestly, it would be best to reset it once, but it seems there are various important things stored in there too…”

Seeing Mikami's smiling expression, Seina flushed bright red, realizing it was about Kenneth's “Friendship Folder” (named by Elma).

“I'll just remove anything that might interfere with the main program.”

“…Please do.”

“What? What's there?”

Whether it was from hanging out with Seto or not, Airi had an uncanny knack for sniffing out things people didn't want others to know. Picking up the scent of secrets, Airi bolted upright and headed straight for Mikami. Panicked, Seina tried to grab Airi from behind, and the two of them ended up tumbling onto the bed together.

(Oh no!)

From the outside, it looked like Seina had pinned Airi down. Sure enough, Airi's eyes glistened, and she slowly wrapped her legs around him.

(If this keeps up, Airi-san might pull some awful prank… no, knowing her, she might just run

with this joke all the way to the end.)

But Seina couldn't move from that position. If he panicked and pulled away, an angry Airi would see the “Friendship Folder”.

(Th-this is the ultimate choice… or maybe not. Elma-san saw it anyway, and so did Principal Mikami.)

Thinking this, Seina quickly moved away from Airi. Sure enough, the sulking Airi headed toward Mikami.

“……Hmm… I see.”

Peering at the monitor, Airi looked at Seina with half-closed eyes and a blank expression. Seina instinctively braced himself, but…

“Well, fine. For the sake of your friend's friendship, I'll pretend I didn't see anything. After all, if your first experience was with someone like me—intelligent, beautiful, a nice body, a perfectly ripe older sister—there wouldn't be much left to look forward to, right?”

Airi used phrasing similar to Elma's, delivering a perfectly precise line that left no room for retorts like “Who's that supposed to be?” She backed down with surprising ease.

“The process is complete. All that's left is for Seina-kun to complete the initial registration. The steps are…”

“Hey hey, if it's registration, how about I walk you through it step by step right now on that bed…”

“But didn't you just say that having his first experience with a stunningly intelligent, beautiful, curvy, perfectly ripe older sister type would leave nothing left to look forward to? Besides, if we don't leave this room soon, Kiriko-san, who's getting impatient in the hallway, will barge in. Seina-kun, you just need to insert you ID card to complete the registration.” Mikami grabbed Airi by the collar and, just as she'd dragged her to Seina's room, effortlessly hauled the struggling Airi out.

The door closed, and the room was suddenly enveloped in an overwhelming silence. Seina, suddenly released from the pressure, collapsed onto the bed.

“I'm exhausted… I'll leave the NB for tomorrow and get changed and go to bed…”

Summoning his last ounce of strength, Seina sat up and began changing into the pajamas Kiriko had prepared. However, perhaps because he was now in more comfortable clothes or because moving to change had loosened him up a bit, Seina paused thoughtfully when he saw the NB he'd intended to leave on the desk.

“…Well, Principal Mikami went to the trouble of fixing it, so I guess I'll just do it today.”

He placed the NB on the desk and inserted his ID card into the protruding slot. The NB's eye-like section lit up, and a body scan began. The check items for the body scan data scrolled

rapidly across the NB's eye section, but it finished in just about ten seconds.

“User, Yamada Seina… You have been confirmed as my master.”

“Whoa, Airi-san?”

The NB suddenly spoke… in Airi's voice.

“Airi? Master, does that mean you're naming me Airi?”

“Huh? Ah, no… it's just your voice sounded familiar… Wait, you can understand what I'm saying?”

“Yes. Though not perfectly. As data accumulates, I should be able to grasp your subtle nuances. The current voice is based on default settings, but it can be adjusted to your preference. Shall I proceed with the settings change now, including the naming?”

“…No, I'm too tired today. Let's do it tomorrow.”

“Understood. How shall I manage your schedule, Master? The public schedule is already installed, but if you provide me with your detailed schedule, I can also function as a personal assistant. Following that detailed schedule, I can handle necessary notifications, practical tasks… To be specific, I can wake you at your designated wake-up time, prepare your clothes, and set breakfast.”

A monitor displaying a rough schedule appeared before Seina. It detailed the GP Academy curriculum meticulously over two years. From there, what appeared to be that day's schedule emerged. The table, divided into seconds, darkened as time passed.

“No plans for tonight. Tomorrow's schedule only has home training confirmed.”

“Got it. But I can't see the detailed schedule right now. I'll probably find out more tomorrow, so I'll let you know then. Anyway, I just want to sleep now… Oh, and don't wake me up in the morning.”

“Understood. This unit will now transition to sleep mode. Good night, Master…”

“Good night.”

After confirming the light from NB had gone out, Seina collapsed onto the bed. He let out a sigh of relief and fell into a deep sleep the very next moment.

Determining Seina was asleep, the room lights dimmed, and darkness and silence enveloped the space. Just then, the NB on the desk began to glow faintly. Its spherical shape began to expand, gradually taking on a human form.

Resembling a porcelain doll, the NB effortlessly lifted Seina's body, who was sprawled face-down on the bed, and carefully tucked him into the futon.

“Good morning, are you awake?”

A different female voice came from the NB, sounding like a slightly out-of-tune foreign broadcast.

“It’s time to eat, please come to the dining area.”

The cheerful, bouncy voice faded away as NB transformed back into its spherical form.

“Master, are you awake?”

In the guest room, Airi, dressed in a maid uniform, stood before a large full-length mirror, speaking to her reflection with a demure demeanor.

“Hmm! Not bad at all. When I wake Seina-kun… I mean, Seina-sama tomorrow morning, he'll be surprised, won't he?”

In the full-length mirror, Airi was smiling quietly, dressed as an elegant and refined maid, the kind that wouldn't look out of place in the Jurai Imperial Palace.

“Hohoho, Seina-kun's heart might just stop.”

“More importantly, if you go into Seina-sama's room dressed like that, Kiriko-sama will kill you.”

“And if word got out that we tolerated Airi-sama dressing like that, our own lives would be in danger.”

“So, in short, please take it off immediately.”

Mikami, Karen, Gyokuren, and Suiren, who had been watching Airi-sama from a short distance away, chimed in with perfectly timed remarks.

“Whaaaaat? Why? I’m dressed properly, aren't I?”

“Precisely because you are properly dressed, it's no joke! …Of course, if you intend to go wake Seina-sama in that outfit tomorrow morning, we can't stop you. But we duly warned you, so please proceed at your own risk.”

After Hakuren declared this on behalf of the group, leaving Gyokuren and Karen behind to finish the handover, she headed for the entrance with Suiren and Mikami.

“Hmph! I'm not scared of Kiriko-chan.”

As she said this towards the door that Hakuren and the others had left through, Airi began posing in front of the mirror again. However, she didn't notice that the door behind her opened silently and a short person entered.

“Mikami-sama, thank you for today.”

Kiriko, Elma, and Amane, who had been waiting at the entrance, bowed deeply.

“The pleasure was all mine. I'll be leaving Airi-sama behind, but please make sure she comes to work tomorrow no matter how much she complains. Ah, you don't need to see me off here.”

Mikami walked through the front garden to the elevator, stopping Kiriko who tried to accompany her.

“Well then, good night.”

The direct elevator doors closed. A few seconds later, front desk staff boarded the elevator as it arrived at the first-floor entrance.

“Mikami-sama, we've been waiting for you.”

As soon as the front desk staff stepped in, the doors closed and the elevator continued to descend. Before you could blink, the elevator, now just a round plate, descended into a hemispherical dome about 50 meters high, bathed in soft light. The front desk staff bowed as they left, and Mikami stepped into the dome.

At first glance, it resembled a garden lush with trees, but what grew there were not plants—they were giant clusters of various mineral crystals. Ascending gentle stairs with a strange, velvety texture, she found Seto and Washu waiting in a hut surrounded by enormous crystal pillars.

“We apologize for taking up your valuable time. Please, have a seat.”

Looking around, Mikami sat in the spot Seto indicated.

“When did you manage to create something like this?”

“It was originally one of my experimental facilities. The location seemed convenient, so I quickly added the bare minimum of facilities. I never imagined that the ownership would be changed without my permission and that it would be developed into a resort, hahahaha.”

“He was a student of Washu-sama from the Principality of Aliu, wasn't he?”

“That guy's always been a sly bastard. Well, I gave him a good scare during that pirate incident, ha ha ha. That was satisfying, though.”

“I see. So that's why you…”

Mikami, at Seto's request, had the entire island purchased by companies affiliated with Mikami, then replaced the staff and residents with people connected to Seto, Mikami, and Airi.

“With Seina-kun and the others in mind, this is a perfect hideout.”

“Here you go.”

As they spoke, a figure approached Mikami and gently placed tea and sweets before her.

“Oh, Airi-sama, so you were caught after all?”

Before Mikami stood Airi, still in her maid uniform, looking completely sober and dejected as she hung her head. Secret transfer gates to this place and others had been installed in the private quarters of Amane’s residence's servants, hidden even from the owner, Amane.

“You were dressed so interestingly, I just had to kidnap you like this, ahahaha!”

“Hohoho, if only you'd listened to Hakuren-san and the others' advice…”

“Now, hurry up and serve the tea, then start explaining.”

“Yes, Seto… no, Master.”

With teary eyes, Airi finished serving tea and sweets to everyone. She then activated the monitor on the round table and began her explanation while standing.

“First, regarding the progress report on the spy identification checks: all critical points have been verified at this stage. However, we've placed several decoys within each department, so outwardly, the investigation is still ongoing. After scrutinizing the gathered reports, we found no confirmed infiltration into the most feared targets like Jurai or Kuramitsu headquarters. However, we discovered a significantly larger-than-expected number of spies deliberately placed within the Academy. Judging by their ages and GP recruitment histories, it seems they've been infiltrating gradually for quite some time. The connection to the previous incident involving Kuramitsu Mihoshi-san remains unclear, but…”

“Ah, about that. While the foundational technology is the same, there are clear differences in its development stages… Well, we can't definitively say at this stage, but the possibility of a direct connection to this current case is practically zero. It's ironic, though, that our ability to respond so swiftly is thanks to that incident.” With that, Washu motioned for Airi to continue reporting.

“There are no reports similar to this case other than Mihoshi-san's incident. In recent years, we've seen a sharp increase in infiltrators, likely due in part to the significant rise in GP recruitment applicants. However, considering the heightened risk of the plan being exposed, it's also possible that, worst case, the enemy's plan execution is nearing. But the infiltrators over the last few years have been handled distinctly differently from previous ones, so how we interpret this is the question.” Airi finished her report and sat down.

“Just my personal opinion, but… someone must have taken over the plan or hijacked it.”

“Washu-chan, is something bothering you?” Seto noticed a subtle nuance in Washu's tone.

“No, I was just wondering… if they're seriously planning to pull something at the Academy.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The infiltrators before the personnel increase was clearly intended to assist with

intelligence gathering. But now, it's just chaotic. Even if this many people were to carry out some kind of operation, realistically, it wouldn't cause fatal damage. It feels like some kind of fleeting, hedonistic indulgence, you know?" Washu poked at the mochi sweet with her finger, savoring the sensation as she spoke.

"Washu-chan is right. There's no doubt the operational intent has changed. At best, this deployment can only cause disruption. If external forces intended to destroy or occupy the Academy, this is far too sloppy. With this many infiltrators, a more effective deployment should have been possible…"

"Washu-sama, how would you compare the capabilities of whoever's commanding the plan now to before?"

"Hmm… Probably more cunning now. They managed to infiltrate a large number of personnel without being detected until now."

"If the person holding the plans is still an outsider, like before, then it's highly likely they have little interest in the plan itself. It's probably just a performance for their internal collaborators, isn't it?"

Everyone nodded at Mikami's words.

"We're still investigating the internal collaborators, but thanks to Seina-kun we now have a lot more manpower, so I think we'll start to see their true nature soon."

"But… why wouldn't that person be interested in the Academy? That part really bothers me." Washu muttered, causing everyone to gasp.

There was no one who wasn't interested in the Academy, a place where all kinds of technology were concentrated. Especially if they were to place importance on the balance of military power, the technology here was indispensable.

"Anyway, cleaning up the Academy is the priority right now. Once we gather data on when they were replaced, we can predict intruders based on other conditions. That data is arguably more important. If we can get that, we might be able to figure out their purpose."

"If we could just use an Astral Link, we'd figure it out instantly. Hey, Washu-chan, could you make a Bio-Memory that can do that?"

"One advanced enough to link? Monitoring current actions is one thing, but checking past actions requires reading their astral memory. To do that without them knowing, you'd need to form an astral with over fifty percent identical properties just to search for the necessary info… A direct, precise memory scan would be faster."

"So it's impossible after all… Then let's make an astral copy…"

"You know how much power that copy and its maintenance would require? To check that many people, you'd need either a Ryo-Ohki type or a second-generation class Royal Tree, and either way, it couldn't be done secretly."

“Seto-sama, even before that, tampering with the Astral Sea is too dangerous.”

Even when voicing her opinion to Seto, Airi's fear was anything but ordinary. Seto looked utterly unwilling to give up, glancing briefly at Washu.

“Let me make this clear: even if it resulted in another Tenchi-dono, I have no intention of getting involved in this world as the Supreme Goddess. That goes for Tsunami and Tokimi too. Or do you prefer cheating on tests, Seto-dono?”

“Oh, Washu-chan, you're so mean.”

“Oh dear, could we please skip the difficult talk? You all are philosophers, so it's fine for you, but I'm just an old woman. Fortunately, thanks to Seina-kun, we now understand the criteria for identification, and we've also arranged for increased investigation and surveillance by surplus personnel. Isn't it more realistic to handle it that way?”

“Ahahaha, my apologies. You're absolutely right. At this point, their surprise attack has almost certainly failed. All that's left is deciding when to do the big cleanup.”

“In the case of Seina-dono, it's pretty much decided where he should be placed within the GP.”

“Hoho, if possible, I'd like him assigned to that position right now.”

“But…that's why student life is so important.”

Everyone nodded with straight faces at Washu's words.

“Even though he has a more flexible and stronger mind than most, he is still an unstable and impressionable boy. And Seina-dono has one flaw.”

“That's not something we can fix right now. The real problem is the people around Seina-dono. If they start treating him like an object, Kiriko-chan will be terrified. It could also affect Minaho-chan and the morale of the accounting department folks.” Seto spread her hands helplessly and sighed deeply.

“As I said earlier, when Kiriko-chan and Seina-kun are involved, their stats suddenly skyrocket to Seto-sama levels.”

“It's like a nitro boost from love.”

“Heh heh, ours is Tenchi-dono, right? And Sasami-chan too, maybe? But if that happens, then almost everyone would automatically get dragged into it too…”

“Does that mean Washu-chan too?”

“I'm neutral, to be honest. Otherwise, I'd feel sorry for Noike-dono, who would be treated like an object by her mother.”

“Hohoho, even so, in terms of raw military might, it will be the strongest force in the

universe.”

“I'll just end up being the villain. I'm hated anyway.” Seto grumbled with a sulky expression.

“Since no one else seems able to say it, I'll speak for everyone: you brought this on yourself.”

“Washu-chan, you're being mean. Never mind… Airi-chan, I heard the NB assigned to monitor Seina-dono is getting into some funny business?” Seto realized that continuing to argue would not defeat Washu, so she quickly changed the subject.

“Oh, yes. Before I came here, I was contacted by Raireza-san… I found out that Seina-kun's personal data friend, Kirche, who ran away from home, was in NB.”

“Oh my. That sounds interesting.”

“So, Mikami-sama, Raireza-san, and I went to visit her, but…”

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In the virtual living room of the Kirche residence, Airi and the others sat facing Kirche on the sofa.

“I love him!” Kirche said after a long silence, tears welling in her eyes.

Airi blushed and looked down, like a girl suddenly confessed to by a boy.

“Oh my, hearing such adorable words out of the blue makes my heart flutter.”

“Eh? Well, I don't really…”

“Ho ho ho, what I mean is, this old lady is just jealous of your fresh innocence.”

“Ha, haa.”

Kirche blushed bright red and looked down in embarrassment. Her blush was clearly different from Airi's earlier blush; it was very innocent and lovely.

“Damn it… You're so cute. But when it comes to love for Seina-kun, I won't lose to you either.”

×××

“That's the line for the legitimate wife who barges into her husband's mistress's house, right?”

“No way, I could never pull that off.”

“Seto-sama, Washu-sama… this was just a little joke… or rather, we've only just started talking, so please don't interrupt us!”

“Just keep going, keep going.”

×××

“Hey, Kirche-san. More importantly, could you tell me why you don't want to go home?”

“!!…That's…”

“Do you dislike your father?”

Seeing Kirche's agitation, Airi had already realized the reason for her running away.

“No! I don't hate my father… but… but I can't feel anything more for him than that…” Kirche lowered her head, covering her mouth with her hand as if to hold back tears.

“I see… I understand perfectly. I'm sorry. We had to confirm this, after all.”

“Airi-sama, this is something she showed me.”

Raireza showed Airi and Mikami several pieces of data from a position where Kirche couldn't see. “The cultivation progress report for an illegal cybernetic body, transfer records… and a forged birth certificate. Wait a moment, this might be…”

“Oh my.”

Airi and Mikami, as if realizing something, simultaneously reached for their keyboards to access their computers. But for a split second, Airi's hand was faster. Mikami froze, her hand still in mid-air, and stared intently at the monitor. Then, one piece of data appeared, and both of them stared at it intently.

“…It seems to be this, I suppose.”

It was data seized from those arrested during the commotion at Seina's entrance ceremony. Raireza also peered at the monitor from behind them.

“Judging by the format and equipment used, it matches Kirche's data.”

“Then we can prove her testimony is genuine.”

“Well, it's a common story. Even if she’s an artificial intelligence, once an Astral emerges, proper human rights are recognized… And an AI granted human rights can, upon application, be transferred into a cultivated biological body and live as a human. But if it was created illegally and in secret, and a forged birth certificate was obtained, there's only one reason.”

“The creator or owner of an AI is not permitted to marry an AI that has developed an Astral… right?”

“Well, I can't say I don't understand the sentiment. The attachment to one's own masterpiece must be extraordinary. Especially since she's an AI talented enough to be an

idol.”

“Airi-sama. More importantly, what about the possibility of human trafficking?”

“We'll need to investigate that thoroughly before we can say for sure… but for now, the underground intelligence doesn't suggest anything about that, so the likelihood seems low? Well, if they separate for about a hundred years, they'll be recognized as strangers. Holding out until then… is impossible, isn't it?” Airi sighed, looking at Kirche.

She was an incredibly lovely woman, even from a woman's perspective. And from a man's viewpoint, she was undoubtedly one of the ideal female archetypes.

“Okay, Kirche. I can help you, but…”

“!!”

Kirche stiffened, realizing what Airi was about to say.

“No, no… I can't leave him… Not for that!”

“What you're doing, how is it any different from what your father is doing?”

“What do you mean!?”

Uncharacteristically for Kirche, she screwed up her face and glared at Airi. But Airi interpreted that expression as Kirche's feelings being favorable toward her.

“You know it yourself, don't you? He's Seina-kun's personal data. He doesn't have an Astral, he's just a copy.”

“Stop! Please stop! Even if that's true, to me—”

“What about Seina-kun's human rights? His illegally copied personality is being toyed with.”

“Playing with him… I never meant to… I never…” Tears streaming down her face, Kirche collapsed onto the sofa.

“You seem surprisingly reasonable. I thought you'd try to run away or resist, but you seem to be aware of what you're doing.”

Airi stood and surveyed the room once more. The spacious room contained simple yet tasteful furnishings, few in number, along with sofa and table covers that were likely Kirche's handmade creations. The garden visible through the window featured lush green grass, a small flowerbed, and a single large tree. Snow-white laundry hung out to dry, swaying gently in the breeze under the sunlight.

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“How cruel to tear apart two people in love! Airi-chan, you're such a devil!”

“Oh, I could never do something like that!”

“Yes, yes, I'm the bad guy anyway, so don't interrupt me!”

×××

From Kirche's home, her longing for a little happiness came through painfully clear. Airi gently placed her hand on Kirche's shoulder as she cried.

“Hey Kirche, what are you? Are you a program? … No, that's not it. You're human. So why don't you just boldly go for Seina-kun?”

“Huh?” Kirche looked up in genuine surprise at Airi's unexpected words. She herself wasn't sure she was human.

“I'm telling you to get the real Seina-kun, not the virtual one! I'll connect you directly with the personal data over there. While the real Seina-kun is asleep, he's yours!”

“Airi-dono, is that what you call bold?”

“It's a handicap. In exchange, I will protect Seina-kun's memories to protect his mind. And…”

“And?”

“I'd like you to handle Seina-kun's protection, surveillance, and reporting. He'll need to cool off for a while anyway. In return, I'll take responsibility for negotiations with your father.”

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“…So Kirche nodded slightly at Airi's words… So that's it. And if she doesn't do it, you'll tell her father where she is… What a terrible deal, you devil!”

“Oh my, I could never do that.”

“If you keep saying that I'll block your access.”

“You're amazing, Airi-chan, a genius!”

“Oh, I could never pull that off.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

While her phrasing was somewhat irritating, Airi stopped herself from trying to draw out further praise. She knew she'd likely be saddled with all sorts of troublesome conditions and restrictions. After all, reaching into the bush might just pull out the world's largest anaconda.

“Anyway, let's keep in even closer contact from now on. I have a feeling something big is about to change…”

“It's already chaotic enough as it is.”

At Airi's words, everyone genuinely laughed, heartily and from the bottom of their hearts.

“Oh, right, Airi-chan. Don't forget about that survey of her consciousness.”

“I'll give you a hint about that tomorrow. Anyway, I'll head back upstairs now.”

“Don't provoke Kiriko-chan too much.”

“Got it.”

As if relieved to be free from Seto and the others, Airi descended the stairs with a childlike smile, waving cheerfully.

“It gets so quiet once Airi-dono leaves, doesn't it? It reminds me of someone from the past.”

After confirming Airi was gone, Washu smiled pointedly at Seto.

“Ho ho ho, having two people like that around would be quite a handful.”

“Well now, Mikami-dono, are you one to talk? Why not hand over politics to your younger brother and make a comeback yourself?”

“Oh dear, if only both of you would just age gracefully. With people like you in charge, your subordinates sure have it rough.”

At those words, Seto and Mikami exchanged glances, as if to say, “Same goes for you.” But Washu continued calmly.

“By the way, Mikami-dono. When do you expect Widow to be handed over?”

“Well… normally it wouldn't be possible until the trial concludes, but the sentence is as good as finalized. And with her report, there's no hindrance to the investigation… so we should be able to do it within 24 hours.”

“That's a relief.”

“We also want to minimize her contact with others. The trial itself will be conducted in isolation… But are you sure it's okay? Using Widow's astral as the core…”

“It would be a shame to let it dissipate into the Astral Sea. Besides, I have a feeling it might actually work out.”

“Hohoh, I mean, as long as it doesn't turn into a repeat of seven hundred years ago, right?” Mikami looked at Seto as if to confirm.

“Well, events like that are necessary once in a while. Though I'm not exactly thrilled that it's happening now, Washu-chan.”

“The only question is where the event will take place. The key to that direction is Seina-dono… What will you do as “The Demon Princess of Jurai”?”

Washu flashed a challenging smile at Seto. In response, Seto looked to Seniwa representative Kuramitsu Mikami for agreement.

”Build us the finest ship. Washu-chan.”

Mikami smiled as Seto stated it firmly.

Passing through the small entrance hall of Amane’s residence led to a slightly larger multipurpose hall. There, beneath a ceiling that was about three stories high, lay a small garden. A massive, elongated water stone, fashioned from the very rock masses that formed the island, stretched nearly to the ceiling. Moss and trees grew upon it, and from its center, water overflowed, forming a small waterfall.

After everyone had returned to their rooms, late at night when the house was quiet, Amane sat alone, lost in thought, drinking wine under the moonlight streaming through the dome ceiling.

“Oh, Amane-san, what brings you out at this hour?”

The voice came from the dim darkness.

“Just thinking about things, you know. What about you, Elma?”

“I just finished compiling Seina-kun's data analysis report, but it's too early to sleep, so I thought I'd help myself to something in the kitchen…”

“Then why don't we grab something together?”

Amane raised her wine glass, winked at Elma, and said, “Hey, Hakuren and Suiren, stop standing around over there and come join us.” … Then shifted her gaze elsewhere.

“!?”

Elma tensed, turning toward the presence that had appeared with Amane's words.

“As your employer, there are various things I'd like to know.”

“I doubt I can answer much, but since you've made the suggestion, I'll prepare some simple snacks.”

“…When did you—” Elma let out a deep sigh as she watched Hakuren and Suiren head towards the kitchen.

“Suiren was following me, Hakuren was following you. I knew they weren't ordinary maids from the moment I saw them. I suppose they're Seina's bodyguards and our monitors too? Well, considering how we all ended up gathered here, it makes sense.”

“Still, it doesn't feel quite right.”

“That's why I thought we should have a little get-together. Right, Hakuren, Suiren?” Amane said to Hakuren and Suiren, who had returned from the kitchen carrying wine, glasses, and snacks on a cart.

“Our duty here is solely to care for and protect everyone present. Therefore, if you feel uncomfortable, we apologize.”

“It's fine, don't worry about it. Besides, we'll be seeing each other for a while, so let's all get along, okay, Elma?”

“Huh? Oh, of course. I was just a little surprised.”

“Thank you.” Hakuren bowed once, then began pouring wine into the glasses.

“Hey, Hakuren-san, you mentioned looking after us and providing protection earlier. Is this really Mikami-sama's request? Or…”

“Well, let's save that talk for after we toast. Come on, Hakuren and Suiren, sit down over there.”

Amane handed the filled wine glasses to Elma and Hakuren.

“Then, let's toast to this gathering.” Amane downed the wine in her glass in one vigorous gulp.

“Still, Kiriko must be going crazy with four beauties like this as maids. Especially that Gyokuren girl—she's not just exceptionally beautiful, she's got an aura about her too.”

“What she did was just a little prank, so I don’t think it’s a problem for now. However…”

“It feels like we're at the mercy of Seina's bad luck.”

It was just a casual remark, but Hakuren seemed a little taken aback by Amane's sharp insight.

“…Yes, it seems so. She herself appears somewhat bewildered, but I believe Kiriko-sama's concerns lie more with Amane-sama, Elma-sama, and Airi-sama than with us. Especially Amane-sama—even we, who are used to Gyokuren, find ourselves captivated by her.”

Hakuren immediately regained her composure and shifted to the offensive.

“Have you known Kiriko for a long time?”

Amane herself had no intention of probing Hakuren and the others' backgrounds. However,

while Amane was accustomed to living under public scrutiny, Elma was not. This gathering and the questioning were intended to ease Elma's anxiety, even if only slightly. Of course, simply talking with Hakuren and becoming friends wouldn't loosen or eliminate the surveillance. But whether she found their presence unpleasant or not made a significant difference for her mental well-being.

“I'm sorry, but I cannot discuss our private matters or past work history as it would violate confidentiality protocols.”

“Right, well, I guess that can't be helped.”

Amane didn't press further, glancing briefly at Elma.

(I see… Amane-san, because I was concerned about them, she deliberately…) Elma looked at Amane and nodded slightly, as if she understood.

(I guess prying into unnecessary details is pointless after all.) Realizing this, Elma's mood actually lightened.

“Um, about that… Could you tell me about Seina-sama? I heard it was Amane-sama who created the opportunity for Seina-sama to join the GP…” Hakuren said, sensing that the atmosphere had eased and chose a seemingly harmless topic they all shared.

“About Seina?”

“Sounds good. I'm also interested in the details of that story. Could you tell us about it?”

Meeting the expectant gazes of Elma and Hakuren, Amane gave a small nod and began to speak.

“Well… First, there's the special zone on Earth for the current Jurai Emperor's First Wife, Funaho-sama. The people managing that zone… Kiriko is one of them, but they live there as ordinary Earthlings. And there's a rule that once their children reach adulthood, they must go to space at least once. So every year, they take pamphlets for further education and job hunting…” Amane abruptly cut herself off and fell silent, lost in thought.

“Amane-san? Is there something you shouldn't say?”

“… Yeah, come to think of it, that was probably just Seina's bad luck.”

Smiling at Elma and the others, who looked at her anxiously, she spoke again. “The first time I saw Seina was when he passed out from the shockwave during the shuttle's reverse braking and was floating face-down in a pond.”

“Oh my… That's quite the first encounter, I suppose.”

“Right? So, when I saw that, I was shocked. I frantically pulled him out of the pond and immediately started mouth-to-mouth…” Amane herself hadn't noticed, but as she spoke, she touched her own lips and wore an indescribably seductive expression.

“!!”

Elma, Hakuren, and even the usually expressionless Suiren were all struck by Amane's aura and expression, turning bright red.

(Damn, this girl really is cut from the same cloth as Gyokuren!)

Fighting off a shiver that felt almost like pleasure running down their spines, Hakuren and the others simultaneously gulped down their wine.

“She must have been really panicked. Even though there were proper rescue tools, she went for mouth-to-mouth… Ahahahaha, she left a clear lipstick mark on Seina, and apparently Kiriko gave her a hard time about it later.”

“…Hah… I can just picture that.”

“So, once his breathing had stabilized, I took off his clothes to check for injuries… Now that I think about it, I remember seeing his body covered in old scars back then.”

“Scars? You mean Seina-kun's old scars?”

“Yeah. Damn, I was so careless… But back then, I never imagined those scars held any real significance.” Amane brought her hand to her head and ran her fingers through her hair in irritation.

“Do you regret creating the circumstances that brought Seina-kun to space?”

“Regretting what's already happened is pointless. It's just… I wonder if I was a bit insensitive towards Kiriko?”

Amane's words fell like a bomb, silencing the room. For a moment, everyone was silent, reflecting on their own thoughtless actions up until then.

“…You're right. We do need to be more careful from now on. Besides… teasing her carelessly could be life-threatening, after all.”

At Elma's words, Amane, Hakuren, and Suiren smiled and nodded in agreement.

“But why did you give Seina-kun the GP pamphlet?”

“Well, I met Seina inside the Special Zone, and since the person I originally meant to give the pamphlet to is an acquaintance, I just assumed he was connected too, so I handed him the GP Academy admissions brochure~~. The rest is history.”

“Even for the enrollment procedures in the pamphlet, there should be multiple checks in place… I see, so that's due to Seina-sama's biased probability.”

“Hey, Hakuren, what do you guys think of Seina?”

Amane deliberately chose abstract words, imbuing the question with multiple meanings.

Noticing this, Hakuren carefully selected her words as she conveyed their own and Seto's intentions.

“Well… All we know are the records since Seina-sama ascended into space. We are certainly on the side of those who hope for great things from Seina-sama, but we also understand the importance of what such great things mean.” Hakuren paused there and looked toward Suiren.

“We will do our utmost for that purpose.”

(So, Jurai intends to provide maximum backup to utilize Seina's abilities… Still…)

Amane recalled every move Hakuren and Suiren, and Karen and Gyokuren had made up to that point.

(Still, they've thrust some peculiar talent upon us… There's no doubt they're exceptionally capable, but there's something about them that doesn't feel professional. Normally, you wouldn't use someone so conspicuous… It feels deliberate somehow.)

“Amane-sama, what's wrong?”

“Hm? Ah, nothing. We've asked each other what we wanted to know, so let's call it a night.”

Raising her hand lightly, Amane tried to stand but stumbled slightly. Hakuren swiftly moved beside her and supported her body.

“Then I'll escort you to your room.”

“Ah, thank you. Well then, Elma, good night.”

Amane was accompanied by Hakuren and headed up the stairs to her room.

Chapter Four: A Moment of Peace

The morning light streamed in softly from the ceiling, and the air coming in through the open windows was sweet and refreshing, carrying the faint scent of the sea. In the silent morning house, where the only sounds to be heard were the chirping of birds and the soft sound of the waves, it was the kitchen where people first woke up and began their daily routines. It was the same whether they were in space or on another planet.

From the kitchen came the rhythmic sounds of knives and cutting boards, the boiling of pots, and the popping of grilled meat and oil. Kiriko, clad in an apron, hummed softly as she prepared breakfast with Karen.

The timer alarm started beeping, interrupting the performance.

“It's almost time. Karen, I'm going to wake up Seina-chan. You take care of the rest.”

“Yes, Kiriko-sama.”

“…Being called “sama” is so stressful.”

“You can't mix business with personal matters. And Kiriko-sama is a member of the Imperial Family, so you should use honorifics in your everyday life.”

“That may be true, but… Well then, I'll leave it to you.” Kiriko quickly left the kitchen as if she was running away.

(The Imperial Family? I'm fine with just being Kiriko.)

Kiriko ran up the stairs and arrived in front of Seina's room.

“Seina-chan, Seina-chan…” She knocked on the door, but there was no response from within.

Seina never locked his door, in case of an emergency. If there was no answer, Kiriko could just go in and wake him up. But Kiriko hesitated to enter his bedroom. It was because she had started to become conscious of Seina as a man, as Seina became more independent and grew into an adult.

“……But it's about time he should be waking up. He seemed pretty exhausted yesterday because of Airi-sama, so he probably can't manage to get up on his own. Yeah! I really should wake him up.” Concocting an excuse to enter, she repeated it to herself like a mantra, then slowly reached for the door handle.

The door slid open smoothly. Clearing her throat softly, Kiriko stepped inside. Trying to hide her racing heart, she forced herself to appear as calm as possible as she approached Seina's bed.

In the dimly lit room, Seina was curled up in bed, sleeping soundly like a child.

“Morning, Seina-chan,” Kiriko called softly, hesitantly.

“Ugh, no… just five more minutes, just five more minutes… Mom…”

“…Heh. Mom, huh? Still such a child.”

Kiriko felt relieved by Seina's innocent sleeping face and sleep talking, regaining her mental upper hand. Then, suddenly adopting a sharp, older sister expression, and said, “Come on, Seina-kun! It's morning, get up quickly!”

She grabbed the futon and yanked it forcefully toward her. With that momentum, Seina's body rolled over onto his back, facing Kiriko.

“!!!!!!!!!”

Kiriko was completely off guard, mentally disarmed and relaxed, but she froze up when she witnessed Seina's spectacular morning physiological phenomenon.

“S-S-S-”

“…Oh… Kiriko-san, good morning…!”

When the covers were pulled away from him, Seina finally woke up and noticed that Kiriko's stiff eyes were fixed on his crotch.

“Th-This is!”

As Seina frantically tried to cover his crotch with the covers, a hand grabbed his hand.

“Haha. Wow, you're full of energy this morning. It's great to be young.”

“But it looks painful.”

From nowhere, Airi and Gyokuren appeared on either side of Kiriko, holding down Seina's hands and peering down at his crotch.

“As his guardian, I suppose it falls to me to teach him properly.”

“Oh Airi-sama. It is my duty as a servant to take care of my master.”

“Ah, the sound of 'Master'… it's so nice. Maybe I should wear a maid outfit too.”

“Master, which of us do you desire, Airi-sama or me?”

Gyokuren and Airi blushed shyly, glancing at Seina.

“……No, um, which one… what do you mean?”

“Airi-sama, since Master seems a bit undecided, how about we take turns?”

“That sounds good.”

Saying that, Airi and Gyokuren began playing rock-paper-scissors, flanking Kiriko. To Seina, their actions felt like dangling meat in front of a hungry lion.

—BAM!

—CRACK!

Sure enough, the next moment, Seina received a slap on the cheek with a force that felt like his neck had been slashed, and Kiriko's claws dug into Airi and Gyokuren's faces like the jaws of a lion.

“No, stop! Not the faceeeee~”

As Seina lay stunned, clutching his cheek and suffering a mild concussion, Airi and Gyokuren were dragged out of the room by Kiriko, screaming in agony.

“…Don't you have any learning ability or memory?”

Gyokuren was lying on the kitchen bench, her face cold, just like yesterday, and Airi was sitting upright in front of Kiriko a short distance away.

“If you have no business here, then leave immediately.” Kiriko said coldly.

“Listen, at least let me have breakfast with Seina-kun…”

—Thud! Thud!

A wooden crate serving as a table was slammed down in front of Airi, followed by a bowl heaped with rice doused in miso soup. Finally, a piece of grilled jack mackerel plopped onto the top.

This act, as if feeding a dog, finally made Airi bristle. She crossed her arms and looked up at Kiriko, who stood with her arms akimbo.

“What's your problem?”

Kiriko's cold, condescending gaze held an intimidating presence rivaling Seto's. Remembering how angering her over anything related to Seina caused her stats to skyrocket, Airi hung her head, clasped her hands together, and murmured, “… Thank you for the food, “ in a voice barely louder than a mosquito's buzz.

(Oh well, but until Kiriko cools off, I should probably take cover somewhere…) Karen scanned the room, trying to escape before Kiriko's wrath turned toward her. Just then, she noticed Seina quietly heading toward the dining room, glancing toward the kitchen.

(Alright, I'll just vacate the kitchen.) Karen pushed the castor box filled with side dishes, rice, and miso soup, heading toward the dining room as if escaping.

“Good morning, Seina-sama. Everyone else isn't here yet so please sit wherever you like.”

“Ah, yes.”

Prompted by Karen, Seina sat at the farthest end of the table from the kitchen.

(I see.) Karen understood the general situation from Seina's bright red, swollen cheek.

Karen skillfully poured rice and miso soup into the dishes in front of Seina with an elegance that belied her tom-boyish appearance.

(Come to think of it… When I met Karen-san before, she was always yelling at others, so I had this image of her being pretty tough…)

Perhaps because of this domestic scene, Seina watched and found Karen's image overlapping with Kiriko's.

(So she's the caring, serious type, huh?)

“Here you go.”

Karen's eyes met Seina's suddenly as she offered the tray, and Seina flushed bright red.

“Ah, thank you.” Seina said, quickly looking away with his eyes downcast.

Seeing his reaction, Karen blushed too.

“Please take your time. If you need seconds, don't hesitate to ask.”

Karen moved slightly away from Seina and took a few breaths to steady herself, hoping not to be noticed. Just then, Kiriko finally emerged hesitantly from the kitchen, just as Karen had anticipated.

Karen began setting up the tray directly across from Seina, making it easier for them to talk.

(Damn it, Karen, you're too thoughtful!) Kiriko, realizing Karen's intention—or rather, her consideration—felt her own behavior seemed childish. This made her feel awkward about sitting in the spot Karen had prepared.

“Karen, I'll handle the serving… thank you for your hard work.” Kiriko said as she sat diagonally across from Seina, slightly apart, while looking away.

Karen rolled the cart next to Kiriko, bowed, and headed back to the kitchen.

“Phew.” Freed from the awkward atmosphere, Karen let out a big sigh as she entered the kitchen.

“……Ah, the beautiful bride tormented by her scary sister-in-law. But for Seina-kun's sake, I'll endure this trial. Yoyoyoyo~”

In the kitchen, while muttering lines that would probably make Kiriko go berserk if she heard them, Airi was energetically shoveling down a bowl of rice. In stark contrast, Gyokuren, perhaps still recovering from her injuries, sat slumped with a cold compress on her face.

(What is this? This person's… this bizarre resilience…)

“Ah, Karen-chan, seconds. Extra broth and two pieces of salmon, please.” Spotting Karen, Airi cheerfully held out her bowl.

(…Kiriko-sama has her hands full too.) Karen glanced toward the dining area with a troubled look.

Across the dining table, Kiriko sat diagonally opposite Seina, silently scooping rice into her own bowl.

(Damn… This just makes it look like I'm still angry. If Karen stayed, it would have created an easier atmosphere to talk.)

(Th-that's it! When Seina-chan goes for seconds, I'll just smile like I always do… No, wait. If he thinks I'm angry, he won't ask for seconds.)

Glancing over at Seina, she saw that, as expected, he was eating the prepared side dishes in proportion to the amount of rice he had. Unable to find a way to start a conversation, Kiriko's shoulders slumped in disappointment. However…

“Delicious.”

Before Kiriko knew it, Elma had grabbed a piece of meat and potato stew with her chopsticks and taken a big bite.

“Elma!”

“Good morning, Seina-kun, Kiriko-san.”

“Elma, here's yours.”

For once, the intruder was welcomed. Kiriko grumbled, but then began to serve the food with a look of delight.

“I went out of my way to be considerate and delay things for you. The atmosphere was pretty awkward, wasn't it?” Elma stared meaningfully at Kiriko.

“…We weren't fighting or anything.”

“That's not what I meant… Here, Seina-chan, say ah~”

Elma brought the side dish to Seina's mouth. Seina reflexively opened his mouth like a baby bird receiving food from its parents.

“Well, I thought you two were playing newlyweds or something like that.”

“Stop joking around! If you don't eat quickly, I can't clean up…!!”

But Kiriko, who had looked away, saw the figure of another resident enter her field of vision and nearly dropped the bowl she was holding in surprise.

“Good morning~~”

Amane raised one hand and gave a perfectly ordinary, cheerful greeting—still clad only in her underwear. Had she showered before coming to the dining room? Her flushed skin and damp hair only accentuated her sensuality.

“A-Amane! What are you doing wandering around like that?!”

Ignoring Kiriko, Amane moved a chair next to Seina, plopped down, and checked the tension in Seina's shoulders and arms like a doctor.

“How are you feeling? Any muscle soreness?”

Seina desperately looked away from Amane's gentle voice.

“It… it hurts a little when I tense up… but I'm fine.”

“Hey! Amane!”

“You're glad I massaged you, right… Huh? What's that?”

Amane noticed the distinct handprint on Seina's cheek and glanced at Kiriko.

Seeing Kiriko turn bright red and stammer, “Oh, come on… I went out of my way to stall for time. Hey, Seina-chan, open wide, aaaah~”

Amane forcefully turned Seina's face toward her and did exactly what Elma had done earlier.

“Stop it! Just cover up your front already!!”

Kiriko forcibly pulled Amane away from Seina and made her put on the apron Kiriko had been wearing to cover her underwear.

“Heh… Somehow, that looks even more… naughty, doesn't it?”

Amane's underwear was completely covered by the apron, but conversely, it made her look like she was wearing nothing but the apron. Amane, now in what was commonly called a “naked apron”, looked far more erotic than she had in her underwear. It was enough to make even a woman's heart race. Indeed, both Elma and Kiriko were flushed crimson, mesmerized by Amane.

“I see, so this outfit is better… Hey, Seinaa, mouth-to-mouth.”

If even women were mesmerized, men—especially boys—couldn't possibly resist such charm. Like someone petrified by Medusa's gaze, Seina froze, unable to move. Amane took a piece of nori in her mouth and seductively nuzzled up to him.

“!!!!”

But Kiriko's anger overpowered Amane's charm.

“… Enough…”

“Enough already!”

Before Kiriko could finish shouting, a voice even more commanding echoed through the dining room. It broke Amane's spell, and the room fell silent as if doused with cold water.

“A-Airi-sama?”

“Really. What is this ridiculous commotion first thing in the morning?”

Airi, her stomach now full, had finally switched into serious Academy Chairman mode.

Regaining her sanity… or rather, becoming serious, Airi possessed an authority that instantly restored the overly relaxed atmosphere to normal.

“I'm not saying you can't talk during meals, but this is a bit excessive. And Amane Kaunaq!”

“Y-yes!”

At Airi's authoritative voice, Amane reflexively snapped to attention and saluted.

“A naked apron is sacred attire meant only for truly important people. Moreover, it's a special, limited-use item that unleashes its maximum effect when worn by a lovey-dovey couple in a closed space, just the two of them… If you wear something like that where other people are, you just look like a complete idiot!”

But Airi was Airi, after all. A woman who carried on the traditions of a Philosopher.

“Well, you can't tell if she's being serious or not.”

“Seina-kun!”

“Y-yes!”

“Wanna come over to my place now? I'll show you the true essence of the naked apron.” Airi, sitting back with her elbows on the table, said with the utmost seriousness.

But…

—CRACK!

Kiriko's furious Iron Claw struck Airi's face once more.

“Everyone, I hate to rush you, but once Airi-sama is changed, I'll be heading to work right away. So please hurry up and finish breakfast.”

“Stop! Not my face!”

And just like that, Airi was dragged away by Kiriko and vanished somewhere.

About fifteen minutes later, Amane and the others were at the rooftop shuttle port to see Airi off.

“I want to train Seina-kun too. And give him a massage in the bath…”

“No way! Mikami-sama strictly ordered us to make sure Airi-sama goes to work!”

Kiriko was about to lose her patience with the relentless Airi. She took hold of the giggling Airi by the collar and roughly tossed her into the cruiser.

“Right, right! I'm perfectly capable of looking after Seina all by myself. Leave this to me and

hurry off to work already~~~!”

Hearing Amane's cheerful words, Kiriko dashed over to Karen, who had rushed out to see them off. She gripped Karen's hand tightly and pleaded, “Please, Karen, you're my only hope. Keep a close eye on Amane. After the handover, ask Hakuren to take over.” She pleaded.

Confirming Karen's silent nod, she then took Gyokuren's hand, her expression blank this time, “Please, Gyokuren, you don't have to do anything. Just don't go near Seina-chan. Otherwise, I might end up using more force than necessary next time.” She said, almost threateningly.

“Yes, I understand.”

“Then I'm counting on you.”

After double-checking with Karen, Kiriko rushed to help Elma, who was desperately holding back Airi, and dragged Airi into the cruiser. Before the door could close, the cruiser silently began to move.

“Nooo, no no! I wanna train with Seina-kun!” Airi clung to the door of the moving cruiser, crying.

“Airi-sama, you're not a child.” Kiriko said with a cold expression, in stark contrast to Elma's confusion.

“More importantly, Airi-sama. Please tell us how to access NB. That was your purpose for coming yesterday, wasn't it?”

At Kiriko's words, Airi stopped crying instantly.

“…Kiriko-chan, when it comes to Seina-kun, your intuition becomes as sharp as Seto-sama's, doesn't it?”

“So you really are setting something up, aren't you?”

“Yes. I have something to discuss with you all. Let's head to the Core Block first.”

Airi stood up straight and began walking with a firm step.

“Alright, Seina, meet us in the living room in five minutes.” Amane said after seeing off the cruiser before heading straight downstairs to the living room.

Seina immediately went to his room and headed to the wardrobe beside the bed.

“Master.”

NB, sensing Seina's approach, began to activate before he could say anything.

“Whoa! ……Even knowing it's Airi-san's voice, it's still pretty bad for the heart.”

“Master's pulse is normal and there is no visible heart defect.”

“That's not what I meant…”

“You mean startled, right? Just a little joke.”

“You can make such subtle jokes… impressive. But could you please stop calling out to people out of the blue? It didn't start when Kiriko-san and the others were there, so I completely forgot about it.”

“At that time, the situation was somewhat complicated, so I deliberately refrained from speaking. Once I gather a bit more data, I believe I can make more effective judgments to avoid trouble.”

“Oh, right… I'll be counting on you… Oh no. I have to hurry, or Amane-san will scold me.”

“Amane is your instructor, right? Then, since it'll also help confirm your future schedule, please take me with you.”

“Got it.”

Before Seina could grab it after quickly changing clothes, NB suddenly floated up.

“There's no need to carry me.”

“It's floating!?”

“I can reach Mach speeds and travel in space.”

“Space travel?”

“I don’t have hyperspace navigation capabilities, so it takes time, but interplanetary travel is possible.”

“Well… that's incredible.”

Faced with those outrageous specs, Seina found himself switching to polite speech.

“Then let's hurry. We shouldn't keep the instructor waiting too long.”

“Y-yes.”

Seina was practically led out of the room by NB and immediately headed down the stairs. Amane, who had been reading a book on the living room sofa, noticed Seina coming down and looked up.

“Is that the NB Airi-sama mentioned yesterday?”

“Sensei, I have something I'd like to confirm regarding the Master's schedule. Would that be

alright?”

“Whoa! What's that? Airi-sama's voice?” Amane feigned exaggerated surprise, leaning closer to NB and staring intently.

“Yesterday, when I activated it, this was the voice.”

“Huh? …Man, that woman sure has some taste.”

“Sensei?”

NB called out to Amane again, who was scratching her head and grimacing.

“Right… Once Seina's curriculum is announced at GP Academy, we'll adjust it then. For now, stay in standby mode and gather info on Seina's daily routine.”

“Understood.”

“Alright, Seina will start with the same building blocks as yesterday. Oh, and… hey Seina, what's this guy's name?”

“I haven't thought of one yet.”

“Well, then, until you decide, NB will do.”

Amane, who had been looking at NB with interest, picked it up, sat down on the sofa, started up a monitor, and began fiddling with it.

“Amane-san… what are you doing with NB?”

“Well, this voice is confusing and unsettling, right? I thought I'd customize it a bit. Come on, stop standing there and get started!”

Amane kept her eyes on NB and waved her hand at Seina, as if shooing away a fly.

“Master, is it acceptable for me to accept Sensei’s customization?”

“Huh… Yeah, sure.”

“Understood.”

With that, NB accepted Amane's access. Several monitors whirred to life, and Amane began tapping away at the keyboard.

“I'll throw in some other interesting software while I'm at it, so look forward to it.”

“Please… Ah! Amane-san, wait a sec… Whoa!”

Seina remembered the “friendship folder” inside the NB and rushed out to retrieve it. However, forgetting that the load had been dropped for training, he jumped over Amane and crashed into the wall.

“What are you doing? …Haha, I see. Must be something you don't want anyone to see in there, huh?”

Behind Amane, who had started examining the notebook's memory contents with a rather pleased look, Seina remembered that the “Friendship Folder” had already been seen by several people.

(There was no need to panic… But I should delete that anyway.)

“…Huh? What? There's nothing in there… Seriously, you got me excited. I thought there would be a “friendship folder” full of sexy pictures, videos, and pseudo-personal data that a friend gave you. Seina, make sure you make friends properly!”

(Is a “Friendship Folder” a thing over here? But what does “nothing inside” even mean… Oh well, I decided to delete it anyway.)

“In that case, I'll put in the stuff I got from my friends. It's from my model buddies, so it's not something you can just get anywhere…”

“No, I don't need it.” Seina refused flatly.

(If Kiriko-san finds out that Amane-san gave me something like that… it could rain blood.)

Another reason was that receiving such things from Amane meant that she was replacing him, and that he would no longer treated like a man. He felt very reluctant to use them, and had mixed feelings about the whole thing.

“Yeah, those are fun to sneak and look at.”

“Well… something like that…”

“And then, the real kicker is when you suddenly find some erotic images during cleaning or a search, and attach an email saying, 'Take it easy'.”

(Airi-san would totally do that.)

Rubbing his bumped head, Seina headed toward the building blocks to start the same training as yesterday, when suddenly—

“…Thank you for your continued patronage, newlyweds! Welcome!”

A familiar phrase echoed in Airi's voice. As if struck from behind, Seina went limp and slumped down.

“Wh-what the hell!?”

“Hey, sis, you got some nice tits there.” **(TN: See below about NB’s dialect. I found an interesting ‘Old man translator” on the internet. I almost went with this, “Hark, sister mine, those twin treasures doth catch mine aged eyes, aye they do.”)**

“Amane-san! What did you put in there!?”

“Huh? It's the AI character software '100 Classic Old Men: Earth Edition'.”

“Earth Edition… That's super localized, isn't it? Plus, it's got all kinds of weird stuff mixed in… Don't put such strange things in there! And the voice is still Airi-san's, isn't it?”

“Ahahaha, it's amazing how natural it sounds.”

“W-Well, that's…”

For a moment, Seina almost agreed with Amane, but a bad feeling washed over him, and he quickly swallowed his words.

“I can't walk around with this. And if I run into Airi-san, how am I supposed to explain this?”

“…It's so funny though.”

“I'll just say that Amane-san set it up.”

“Yeah, yeah. I'll keep the character normal… And the voice should be male, right? The female ratio in this house is too high.”

Amane quickly changed the settings, then, seemingly losing interest, tossed the NB aside and started reading a magazine.

Kiriko and Elma, watching the exchange from the cruiser's cabin, were doubled over laughing, unable to contain themselves despite being in front of Airi.

“I’ll remember this Amane-chan! …You two are laughing way too much.” Airi, looking displeased, glared sideways at Kiriko and Elma.

“S-sorry… but…”

The Kansai dialect and Airi must have hit Kiriko's funny bone hard; she tried desperately to hold back her laughter, tears welling up in her eyes. **(TN: As Eff stated in the original translation, “In Japanese she installed a Kansai dialect onto it ... I am not bothering to try translating that shit into an American dialect. You’re getting old man NB.”)**

“Still, who deleted Seina-kun's “Friendship Folder”? Poor thing… Could it have been you, Kiriko-chan?”

“I don't tamper with other people's belongings without their permission!” Kiriko abruptly stopped laughing and glared at Airi.” And what do you mean 'poor thing'? Seina-chan is still a minor! It's way too early for him to be looking at something like a 'friendship folder'!”

“But then there's Seina-kun's physiological phenomenon this morning. His heart might be immature, but his body is an adult's.”

“!!”

Kiriko's face flushed bright red at those words. Seeing this, Airi pressed her advantage.

“Living together in an unfamiliar house, surrounded by attractive women—including some top-tier beauties—in this situation where meals are extra generous? Relieving Seina-kun's pent-up frustration might be a pretty serious problem, don't you think? Especially during such a sensitive age. Troubles like this morning or yesterday aren't exactly ideal.”

“It seems you played a part in that too, Airi-sama.”

It was her own doing; her actions had cornered her. But Airi, battle-hardened as ever, continued without changing her expression.

“Anyway, we need to find a way to give Seina-kun some time alone.”

“And that's why you tried to spy on him via NB?” Kiriko, having known Airi for so long, wasn't fooled by such a flimsy excuse. She calmly cornered Airi.

The moment she realized she couldn't get away with it, Airi snapped back angrily. “You… you can't guarantee you wouldn't peek either, Kiriko-chan!”

“I wouldn't do something like that!”

“Ohohohoho. Then what was all that before? Once you've tasted honey, it's hard to forget, you know.”

“It's surveillance for his protection! Don't lump it in with voyeurism. Besides, if I'm training Seina-chan…” Her words trailed off abruptly. Kiriko slumped into her chair in silence, looking exhausted.

“I know, Seina-kun won't be a child forever, and I understand I can't keep hovering over him, doing everything for him. Here, hardly anyone resents Seina-kun's bad luck. But that's precisely why I want him to experience romance more naturally within his school life.”

“Miki Steinbeck-san, perhaps?”

“I hate her! She used Seina-kun for her father’s sake!”

“She's just overly protective. Since she achieved her goal, it wouldn't be strange for her focus to shift to Seina-kun.”

“I can't leave Seina-chan with a girl like that!”

“… They really are alike, aren't they? That girl and Kiriko-chan.”

“We're nothing alike!”

“Right. Then what if I said she resembles Tsukiko-chan?”

“Why would you compare her to Mom… Ah!”

Kiriko's image of Tsukiko and Miki overlapped strongly. Kiriko and Tsukiko were said to look very similar. So it is only natural that people would also say that Kiriko and Miki looked similar.

“No matter what anyone says, she's not worthy of being with Seina-kun!”

“Is this what they call sibling rivalry?”

“No, it's not!”

Kiriko glared at Elma as she whispered to Airi, and Elma quickly hid behind Airi like a startled cat.

“The real problem isn't Miki-san, it's Amane and Gyokuren!”

“Gyokuren-san aside, I don't see Amane-san as much of a problem.”

“In the end, you don't like anyone.”

“Even though I'm only going to be living with Seina-kun for about two weeks, I have no choice but to keep an eye on him 24 hours a day.”

“But it looks like that won't be possible. Elma, take a look at this.”

A monitor activated before Elma, who had been hiding behind Airi.

“Is this a report? …Th-This is!”

Elma's expression changed instantly as she stared intently at the report. As she read on, her face grew grim, and her tightly clenched hands began to tremble slightly. As if confirming this, Airi began speaking.

“…It's possible that the spy in question has infiltrated more than we thought. We haven't yet conducted a full Academy check, so we can't say for sure, but considering the ratio of the oldest spies found in the emergency check of the core to the new students, there may be quite a few… So I think it will be a while before Seina-kun can return to the dorms.”

“What!?”

“Fortunately, we were able to identify this year's new students and most of the faculty and staff during the entrance ceremony. Next up are the second-year students. Due to a computer glitch that corrupted the aptitude test data, we are conducting retests starting today. We will be checking their performance at that time, so I ask Kiriko-chan to oversee the testing. As for the other faculty and staff, we will divide them into groups according to their assignments, and check them when we explain the curriculum and progress. In any case, it is important to act in a way that does not give away any information.”

“I understand… Could it be that the reason why Seina-kun will be late returning to the dorm is because he has to deal with the spy after the check?” As Kiriko spoke, a diagram of the boys' and girls' dormitories appeared.

“Under the pretext of system upgrades, we've decided to fully renovate the dorm facilities. Second-years will move out during their practical training, and first-years will be reassigned rooms. Since that dorm building is designated a historic site, we'll station permanent surveillance and security personnel under the guise of preservation staff.”

“Surveillance and security?” Kiriko frowned, a bad feeling creeping over her.

“Hakuren-san and the others will likely continue handling that duty.”

Hearing Airi's words, Kiriko sighed heavily, but immediately shifted her thoughts elsewhere.

“Still, this seems rather thorough. Why won't you immediately apprehend the spies?”

“We suspect this spy's objective involves simultaneous, multi-location attacks. That's why the crackdown needs to be carried out all at once—across the entire Academy, no, the entire Galactic Federation.”

“But how do you know it's multiple?”

“This spy operates by reconstructing their memories based on a single trigger. And if there are likely to be many infiltrators… What do you think?”

“So they'll start their operations simultaneously… Facility takeover or simultaneous assault for annihilation? Then the target is the Academy!”

“Probably. Elma, I'll ask you to assist Kiriko-chan. A briefing will be held once everyone involved with the GP Academy gathers, so review the relevant materials beforehand. After that, I expect we'll start the investigation first thing this afternoon.”

“Understood.”

In stark contrast to Kiriko's immediate reply, Elma merely gave a small nod and remained silent, staring intently at the documents.

“I see… So this is what happened while communications with the Academy were down.”

In the pitch-black alternate space, Ryoko Balta and Komachi Kyou, a woman over 190 centimeters tall, stood facing each other. She was one of the highest-ranking executives of the pirate guild “DaRuma.”

The information projected before Komachi was identical to the related documents Kiriko and Elma had been shown by Airi.

“None of the plans underway at the DaRuma Guild match this. Based on the data, it's almost certainly Tarrant's organization involved. Though looking at the infiltrator's physical data, there's no doubt he's involved.”

Ryoko looked away irritably at Komachi's calm tone.

”So, it is as I suspected.”

“So, what do you intend to do with this information? If Ryoko has no objections, from my position, I have to report it to the higher-ups. And then, naturally…”

“I can't stand Tarrant's methods… No, I refuse to accept them. This isn't a fight anymore!” Ryoko raised her voice sharply, interrupting Komachi's unflappable calm.

“He's a direct descendant of the Tarrant Guild leader who was destroyed by Jurai. Even though it was a medium-sized organization, it had a long history. How much hidden military strength he possesses isn't fully grasped even by us top executives… no, even by the President. Still, his forces are necessary for the Guild now.”

“A necessary evil, you say?”

“At least as long as his enemies are the same as ours.”

“……”

They had been repeated this conversation countless times before. Ryoko understood everything and spoke deliberately. It was merely a ritual to suppress her own anger, a way to vent.

“But it's true, his methods do stir up unnecessary hostility towards our Guild. Many executives share that concern. He really does need a leash… Alright then, I'll keep this information to myself, right?”

“Yes!”

“Please continue gathering intelligence.”

Ryoko's cheerful hologram vanished, leaving Komachi alone in the pitch-black space. But this decision wasn't swayed by her emotions.

“…So, what do you think?”

Komachi spoke into the empty space. The next instant, the figure that appeared was none other than Kamiki Seto Jurai, who should have been an enemy.

“You passed.”

“Isn’t it about time you told me what you want her to do? …Though, depending on your answer, I have other ideas too.”

“Mutual benefit… That's what this test is for. For now, I'm quite satisfied with her answers.”

“Mutual benefit? …You can't be serious!”

“It's too early to draw that conclusion. It is enough to put a collar on Tarrant for now. And the list of arrests you requested, we're going to detain them all here. Is that acceptable?”

Many of the pirates previously caught up in Seina's misfortune faced extradition requests from other nations for various reasons. And most of them would be executed immediately upon handover, for reasons such as silencing them. Detaining them in Jurai ensured the pirates' safety, protected each nation's secrets, and prevented further damage that releasing them could cause.

“Ah, I'd be grateful if you did that.”

Being a hostage was better than being executed. And under the condition of living in a Jurai facility, they could live with their families.

“Well then, see you later.”

“… How much do you know, Demon Princess of Jurai?” After confirming Seto had vanished, Komachi murmured to herself.

Chapter Five: A Mix of Joy and Sorrow

“Ah, what beautiful weather.”

After the briefing and the allocation of roles for the afternoon, Kiriko had a lot of free time, so she decided to take a walk to refresh herself and walked the few kilometers to the teachers’ lounge.

The computer-related problems had mostly been resolved, but the official curriculum had not yet begun, so there were far more students on the grounds than usual taking classes on basic physical fitness and physical techniques such as arrest and self-defense.

“We need to get things back to normal as soon as possible.” Kiriko muttered as she looked at the students with a smile.

Kiriko climbed about ten steps from the walkway next to the grounds and began walking along the bank lined with snow-mist trees, when she began to feel strange gazes on her.

(Could it be…?)

Kiriko first found out she had a fan club when Seina was kidnapped.

(It feels a bit strange to have a fan club for me… but this is bad, I'll have to be more careful when I do my behind-the-scenes activities in the future.)

Confused by the increasing stares as she neared the school building housing the offices, Kiriko didn't dwell on it further. Only when she climbed the stairs, opened her office door, and saw the figure standing in the back of the room did she realize the meaning behind those stares.

“Good day.”

Ringo, who had been looking outside the window at the back of the room, turned toward Kiriko.

Ringo, bathed in soft sunlight, and the cluttered room piled high with objects. It was a fantastical scene, like a charming spirit appearing in an old library.

“It's been a while, Kiriko-sama.” Ringo bowed gracefully, her demeanor that of an innocent young girl.

“… Ringo-sama?”

For a moment, Kiriko lost her sense of where she was and looked around. Realizing once more that this was indeed her office, she let out a small sigh of relief.

“Ringo-sama, suddenly appearing here like this… What has happened?”

“I wanted to see Seina-sama and speak with him… But his whereabouts are top secret, and Seto-sama says I should find him myself… So I thought if I came here…”

“I see. Oh! I'm terribly sorry I didn't notice. Please, have a seat.” Realizing Ringo was still standing, Kiriko hurriedly pointed to a nearby sofa.

“Thank you.”

Even the graceful motion of Ringo sitting down on the sofa was so lovely it made one sigh. At work, Ringo was a sharp, career-woman type, but her private persona was a complete transformation. Or rather, her private self was her true nature; her work persona was a distortion born from the mentally grueling environment of Seto's accounting department—a place where every day felt like the deadline for a manga artist, novelist, or animator.

“But since you've come all this way… if it's about the pirate capture, it's already…”

“As the head of the accounting department, I really should at least formally thank him properly. It sets an example for my subordinates… And this.”

Ringo handed over an MMD card with an opal-like iridescent sheen.

“This!?”

“It's the reward distribution from Widow's remaining assets and its breakdown. All I can do

is add a little extra to the reward Seina-sama received."

"Just a little extra…"

Kiriko was shocked when she saw the amount displayed on the plate. It was an amount that could not be compared to the reward for capturing a pirate. Only a philosopher could possibly earn that much.

"Ringo-sama… I've only ever seen figures like this in the initial draft of the national budget at the start of the fiscal year. I truly appreciate your kindness, but accepting something this outrageous…"

It was enough to buy and maintain an entire resort planet in the Galactic Federation's First-Class Star Domain. In the outer reaches, it could even purchase a solar system-class territory. In fact, if Jurai agreed, it could buy the entire Solar system, Earth included.

"But that was her… Widow's wish. And we've avoided anything that could cause problems later, so I don't think it will lead to the situation Kiriko-san fears. Of course, should any issues arise regarding this matter, we will take full responsibility and handle them."

Her tone was firm. It might have seemed a bit forceful, but Ringo's reasoning was sound. Even if Kiriko was Seina's guardian, she had no reason to refuse outright. Yet, even with sound reasoning, emotions weren't always so easily resolved. Accepting Ringo's proposal meant allowing contact between her and Seina. As it was, Amane, Elma, and Hakuren and her girls were already here as maids.

(I can't disrupt Seina-chan's life any further. He has to learn so many important things for his life-critical work ahead. It's best to avoid relationships with the opposite sex.)

But more than that, Ringo's adorable mannerisms were stirring Kiriko's heart.

The women gathered at Amane's house now possessed beauty that would make celebrities green with envy. And then there were Amane and Gyokuren, whose beauty alone was nothing short of miraculous. Yet even among them, Ringo possessed an utterly exceptional, straight-as-an-arrow, super-fastball-like cuteness. Moreover, she belonged to the Imperial Family, specifically a branch of the "Number One Wife Material" super-ultimate, supreme brand lineage. Unless a man had extremely peculiar tastes, there was no way he could resist her advances.

(If Seina-chan wanted to live in seclusion somewhere remote, that might be fine too…)

But Seina wouldn't want that. That means he must learn to protect himself at the GP Academy. In such times, excessive wealth and women would undoubtedly hinder Seina's growth.

(…Besides, I can't drag Ringo-sama down that path of hardship by involving her in Seina-chan's bad luck.) That was the devil's whisper nestled deep within Kiriko's heart.

"Understood. I have work I must finish, so please wait a moment. I'll make some tea now."

“Thank you.”

“!”

Ringo's carefree smile was pure poison to Kiriko right now. It felt like striking the head of a beloved puppy or kitten with a hammer—battling that overwhelming guilt, Kiriko headed toward the kitchenette set up in the corner of the room.

(For Seina-chan and Ringo-sama)

Repeating it like a mantra, battling the righteousness and Armageddon raging within her, Kiriko carefully followed the steps to brew the special tea Minaho had given her, ensuring it reached its peak perfection. Finally, she added a few drops from a small vial.

“Here you go.”

“What a lovely aroma. Oh… but isn't this Shinju Sake?”

“Yes, I concentrated some I received from Airi-sama before and turned it into a flavoring.”

It was the Shinju Sake infused with nanomachines that Airi had brewed, the same one she'd shared with Amane.

“Thank you for such a precious thing.”

Suppressing the urge to knock the cup out of Ringo's hand as she happily thanked her, Kiriko clutched the tray so tightly it seemed ready to shatter and headed back to her seat.

—CLANG!

A dozen seconds later, the cup slipped from Ringo's hand. Kiriko silently glided closer and supported her body.

Kiriko and Amane’s office seemed to double as a small research space, equipped with a medium-sized teleportation terminal.

(I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry)

Fighting back tears, Kiriko repeated the words of apology like a mantra in her mind. She laid Ringo down in a valuable goods case capable of freezing time, then packed her up quickly.

“Now, just send this to Seto-sama… Alright, transfer.”

After confirming the case containing Ringo had been safely transferred and the receipt notification arrived, Kiriko hurried toward the entrance. The office was about the size of a regular classroom, but it felt somehow stifling. Escaping into the hallway, Kiriko stretched and took a deep breath.

Just as she let out a sigh of relief,

“Masaki-sensei!”

“!”

Startled by the sudden voice from the side, Kiriko reflexively leapt sideways about five meters to create distance. Standing there was Miki Steinbeck, wearing a quiet smile.

“Miki… Steinbeck-san?” Kiriko recognized Miki's smile.

(Did you see it?!)

Kiriko felt it instantly. Miki's expression—it was identical to the look her mother, Tsukiko, had worn when she'd seen through Kiriko's lies.

(Damn it! This place…)

Even in a less crowded area, Tatsuki Ringo drew attention. The students on the field earlier had been looking at Ringo. And Kiriko's office was right next to the field where Miki's father had built his secret underground lab.

“Hey, Miki-san. I'd like to change locations a bit. Is that okay?”

“Yes, there are too many people around here.”

In the living room of Amane's house, under the watchful eyes of Amane, NB, and Karen, who was watching over Amane at Kiriko's request, Seina continued to practice building blocks. The speed and height of the stacks were worlds apart from last night.

“Seems easier than yesterday, huh?”

“Yeah, I think I'm starting to get the hang of how to relax.”

“Master's fatigue levels are lower than yesterday, so I think we can keep the load at 80% even under normal circumstances.”

“Then, shall we have a bath and massage before lunch?”

“Then I'll accompany you.”

“Okay. Let's go then.”

Amane headed toward the bathroom with Seina, NB, and Karen. A few minutes later, Karen's slightly cute little scream rose from the bathroom.

“Ah, Amane-sama… Why do I have to undress too…?”

“You can't very well take a bath with your clothes on!”

“I'm not bathing, so I'll stay like this.”

“Shut up and take it off! Ah, Gyokuren, you're just in time, help me!” Amane called out to

her.

Whether drawn by the cute squeal or sensing something amusing happening, Gyokuren entered the bathing area.

“Yes, gladly ♡”

“Hey, Gyokuren!”

Karen felt something akin to terror, enough to give her goosebumps. That overwhelming beauty and something bordering on madness lurking deep within her… It was Seina who saved her from the urge to scream.

“Amane-san, forcing someone isn't good.”

The moment she heard that voice, Karen's terror and visceral revulsion vanished as if they'd never existed. But Gyokuren and Amane's double attack didn't stop.

In the blink of an eye, Karen was stripped naked and thrown into the bathtub alongside Seina.

Instantly deprived of her sense of up and down, Karen fell into a mild panic. She immediately tried to calm her mind, waiting for her senses to return. Of course, this too lasted less than a second. But faster than Karen's trained recovery could kick in, she felt a strong hand pulling at her.

(Who?)

Karen realized from the recovery of her inner ear, gravity, and the direction of buoyancy that the hand was trying to help her float, and she clung to the hand's strength and quick decision-making.

“Bwah!”

Karen exhaled sharply, then stumbled forward, clinging to the owner of the arm.

“If you have something to say, say it already.”

Kiriko and Miki had moved to a deserted grove and stood facing each other in silence. Unable to bear the quiet any longer, Kiriko spoke first.

“I came to check on Dad, but I never imagined I'd see something like that.”

“Ah, that thing—”

“What… What are you trying to say?”

Completely overwhelmed, Kiriko fell silent.

“What happened earlier… it won't affect Seina-kun, right?”

“Of course not!”

“Then I have nothing more to say.”

“Ugh…”

This battle was a complete defeat for Kiriko. While the inherent weakness lay with Kiriko herself, once Seina's consideration was brought to the forefront, there was no room for counterargument. Moreover, it was even more so because Airi had pointed out that Kiriko's mother, Tsukiko, resembled Miki, someone Kiriko found difficult to deal with.

“What?! Amane Kaunaq and Seina-kun are living together?”

What broke Kiriko's stalemate was the voice of a student coming from near the entrance to the forest.

Intrigued, Kiriko and Miki, without exchanging a glance, began moving toward the voices like ninjas, silently and at high speed.

“That's right, Senpai. Under the guise of daily training after Bio-Enhancement, just the two of them!”

The ones talking were Seina's roommates, Kenneth and Rajau, along with Miki's two roommates. Kiriko and Miki hid in some nearby bushes, watching the scene unfold.

“But if that's the case, doesn't that mean they're not actually living together?”

“Seina has a guardian at the Academy. So why is Amane-sensei in charge of her daily training…”

“I see. That does sound suspicious.”

(They're spreading strange rumors and involving the younger students… What troublesome girls…)

Miki suddenly felt a strange vibration coming from Kiriko next to her, so she looked across and saw that Kiriko had turned on a monitor and was looking at something.

(What?!)

Miki nearly gasped aloud, quickly covering her mouth. There, displayed on the screen, was Seina embracing Karen in a bathtub.

Kiriko, gritting her teeth and trembling, began running like a cheetah crouching low as it charges its prey.

Amane's house performed maintenance automatically and didn't have a system terminal.

This meant cleaning and tidying up mainly had to be done by hand. However, in reality, at Amane's house level, the secondary effects of the security system usually eliminated most sources of dirt. Furthermore, as standard technology, furniture, furnishings, and building materials were treated to decompose dirt, so cleaning was hardly necessary.

After finishing Amane and the others' laundry and tidying up their rooms, Gyokuren yawned boredly while watching Seina and the others in the bath from the dressing room. Since she had been told not to go near Seina, she stripped Karen of her clothes, threw her in the bathtub, and quickly got back to work.

“Karen's having fun, isn't she? I wish I could've played a little longer too… Oh? A guest?”

A monitor activated with the chime, displaying Tennan Seiryo standing before the elevator.

“Level A Person of Interest, Tennan Seiryo… I see, preventing entry would be more troublesome than it should be. Well, it sounds interesting, so I'll allow you in.”

Gyokuren opened the elevator doors and immediately headed for the entrance.

As she opened the front door and stood there, the elevator doors opened at the same time. Seiryo was walking silently and quickly, ignoring Gyokuren, and was about to go up to the entrance when he suddenly stopped walking.

“Y-you are…” Even Seiryo couldn't ignore Gyokuren's beauty.

—Take what you like by force.

Just as he was about to put that family motto into action, Seiryo felt an overwhelming chill emanating from her.

Seiryo's probabilities were naturally biased towards good fortune, the opposite of Seina's. Of course, not to the same extent as Seina's, but it was still a level that he could recognize as a clear positive in his life. However, Seiryo also had the instincts of an unrepentant fool that overrode his good luck. This could be seen in his behavior towards Amane, but even his foolish instincts judged her to be dangerous.

“How can I help you?”

Those casual words caused Seiryo to break out into a cold sweat.

“Ah… no, well, how's Seina-kun's training going? I've been so worried about him I just had to come check on him. Hahaha!”

Like a frog stared at by a snake, Seiryo was unable to move and quickly looked away from Gyokuren. Freed from the intimidation of her gaze, Seiryo ran into Amane's house and began to stomp towards the back of the house. Normally, if one sensed such danger, one would simply run away, but it was a fool's instinct to choose to stay where he was.

… So,

“By the way, where is Seina-kun… I wonder? And I don't see Amane anywhere either?” Seiryo asked as he returned to the entrance after five minutes of searching in the wrong place, turning his face away so as not to look Gyokuren in the eye.

“Amane-sama is currently bathing with Seina-sama.”

“Wh-what?!”

“…And it's been quite a while since they entered, but they still haven't come out.”

“Could they be in the bathroom?!”

“However, I cannot interfere with my master's private affairs.”

“But what if that savage is attacking her!?”

“There's no screaming, no cries for help either…”

“Bu-but still!”

Terrified of Gyokuren, Seiryo couldn't bring himself to burst into the bathroom and was desperately trying to concoct some excuse. Gyokuren was deliberately enjoying this, but she too wanted an excuse to go to the bathroom.

“But… perhaps she's feeling unwell and collapsed?”

“Th-that's it!”

She stopped teasing Seiryo and offered a statement that provided a perfect excuse. And Seiryo took the bait hook, line, and sinker.

“Would you like to go check? By the way, the bathroom is over here.”

“Yes!”

Seiryo checked the map displayed on the monitor, nodded vigorously, and started running towards the bathroom with Gyokuren.

Zudodododododo! It was an incredible force. Of course, he had feelings for Amane, but he was also terrified of Gyokuren following behind from.

“Amane, are you safeeeeeee! Your beloved Tennan Seiryo has come to rescue you!” Seiryo kicked open the bathroom door and scanned the area.

“Hmm, hmmmm… she's not there?”

“Oh dear, that's strange, isn't it?”

“No good! We must hurry and search! What if she's sunk in the tub or collapsed somewhere…”

Seiryo, who had been standing by the entrance, entered the bathroom while taking off his jacket and pants.

“…What would you do if she was submerged?” A voice called out.

“Ha ha ha! Of course, as life-saving measures—mouth-to-mouth resuscitation! And chest compressions!”

Seeing that lecherous expression and those suggestive hand gestures, even a critically injured victim would jump up and run away. Only after revealing his true thoughts with that smug grin did Seiryo finally notice the murderous intent directed at him.

“……Ah!”

Beside Seiryo stood Amane, fully geared up for combat, wearing a faint smile.

“H-hey, Amane… I’m glad you're safe. Well, she was worried because you weren't coming out of the bathroom… Oh?”

At the bathroom entrance, Gyokuren—who should have been there to vouch for Seiryo's innocence (?)—was nowhere to be seen. The next instant, a tremendous thud and a heavy shockwave that shook the air reverberated through the bathroom. Simultaneously, Kiriko's aircar, still at breakneck speed, careened onto the perimeter road of the island where Amane's penthouse stood.

—Agyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

A scream echoed from above as Seiryo crashed onto the hood of Kiriko's aircar. Kiriko instantly recognized him, but without slowing down, she used the angle of the windshield to perfectly fling Seiryo's body into the sea.

In the bathroom, Amane, still buzzing with the excitement of battle, glared fiercely in the direction Seiryo had flown, breathing heavily.

The shattered glass scattered everywhere immediately liquefied and was sucked into the drain, while the window glass slowly regenerated. When the wind blowing through the window finally subsided, Amane finally deactivated her combat gear, stood completely naked, and exhaled deeply.

“Ah, Amane-san, maybe you're going a bit too far …” Seina said, averting her gaze from Amane's naked form standing tall.

“That wouldn't kill him! …Huh?”

Amane noticed Seina standing protectively in front of Karen, shielding her from the combat debris. While the glass fragments were designed not to injure people, small red scrapes were still visible here and there on Seina's face and body.

“Oh no… Dammit!”

“Seina-sama!”

Karen noticed it at the same time as Amane and began licking Seina's wounds like an animal.

“K-Karen-san!?”

“Please don't move.”

Karen firmly held Seina, who was flustered by the sensation of Karen's chest against his skin, and continued licking him relentlessly. Amane was just as shocked by this.

“H-Hey! What are you doing, Karen!?”

“Huh? ……Ah!”

Shaken by Amane's grip on her shoulder, Karen finally grasped the meaning of her actions. Leaping away from Seina, Karen bowed her head, flushed crimson.

“I-I'm so sorry. I just… fell back into habits from back home… You see, my species has stronger antibacterial properties in our saliva than usual, so in emergencies, we…”

“Hohohhoh~. To anyone?” Amane pressed her, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“……That's…”

“Well then, I can't let myself be outdone.”

Just as Amane lunged at Seina, the three present were struck by an overwhelming chill. Amane and Seina recognized that sensation.

“You're going to explain what you're doing, right?”

At the entrance to the bathroom stood two Namahage, which was even more terrifying than the one from last night.

“Ki-Kiriko-san! ……M-Miki-senpai?”

“Huh!?”

Seina's unexpected words instantly calmed Kiriko's anger.

“Miki-san… wh-when did you…?”

“We've been together since the GP Academy. But more importantly… Seina-kun! Explain this situation to us.” Pushing aside a stunned Kiriko, Miki stepped forward and pointed her finger sharply.

“W-Well, that's…”

“Well, as you've seen, it's a fierce battle of love, full of wrestling and tangling. Young people are so passionate and full of energy, aren't they?” Gyokuren appeared with perfect timing and began her explanation.

It was like a tanker truck loaded with gasoline crashing into a fire that was just starting to die down.

“…Seina-chan…”

Kiriko's anger, which had been subsiding, reignited, plunging the situation into even deeper chaos. Amane and Karen, drained of any energy to make excuses, hid behind Seina. But this further inflamed Kiriko and Miki's fury.

Kiriko and Miki began trembling like faint tremors before a volcanic eruption. The pressure emanating from them surpassed even Seto's.

“Ah, aaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Amane and Karen collapsed weakly to the ground, trembling.

“It's not what it looks like, Kiriko-san, Miki-senpai… It's a misunderstanding!”

“Oh? A misunderstanding, is it?” That clear, authoritative male voice instantly transformed the atmosphere, which had been on the verge of exploding.

“Oh my, oh my, it seems quite serious, huh? Ho ho ho.” And that refined, gentle female voice instantly eased the tense atmosphere.

“Oh… Father… Mother…” Amane said in surprise at the sudden appearance of the middle-aged man and woman.

“Huh?”

Everyone in the bathroom was roughly the same age. Having someone's parents show up in such a place created an odd sense of discomfort and embarrassment. Fortunately, Kiriko and Miki were naturally calm people.

The bathroom, which had been filled with such a hostile atmosphere, fell completely silent.

“Well then, I'll go prepare some tea.” Gyokuren, looking pleased, murmured and left the bathroom.

In the penthouse living room, the awkward atmosphere that had once calmed down was becoming more complicated, the main cause of which was the conflict between Amane and her father, Masumi Kaunaq.

Both of Amane's parents were very handsome, but not as handsome as Amane. Amane's beauty was a miracle of nature, born from a montage of parts of her father and parts of her mother, which could be called divine.

(But… judging by the way they're glaring at each other, she seems to have her father's personality, huh?)

Seina cautiously yet intently observed Amane's parents, whom he was meeting for the first time. While he was at the center of this awkward atmosphere, his position was like the eye of a storm—he was assessing the situation before the blame could land on him.

(But why is Miki-senpai here?)

Following Miki's—no, Kiriko and Miki's—gaze, he saw Karen standing there awkwardly.

(Are they looking at Karen-san? Why?)

Seina, who didn't suspect for a moment that he was being monitored by NB, looked at them curiously.

“Please.”

Seina's thoughts were interrupted by Gyokuren. The only one free at that moment, Gyokuren cheerfully placed coffee cups in front of Amane and the others. This action broke the tense, frozen atmosphere.

“So, what brings you here?”

“Well, Mom kept nagging me that she absolutely had to see Amane's face, so I had no choice but to come here.”

“Liar.”

Amane's mother, Nachure Kaunaq, nodded with a smile, as if agreeing with Amane's words. Masumi, unaware of Nachure's actions, continued speaking.

“Ever since you left home, Mom's lost her appetite. Every night she looks at your photo and looks so sad! That's why today, she absolutely, desperately wants to take you home with her!”

Beside Masumi, who was emphasizing his point, Nachure shook her head side to side with a smile, denying it.

“I always tell you not to use Mom as an excuse!”

“But you know, after running away from Kaunaq and joining the GP…”

Ignoring Amane's words, Masumi looked around the living room with an exasperated expression. Hearing Masumi's words, Seina felt the spotlight was about to turn to him and tensed up. Sure enough, Masumi gave Seina a final, piercing glare.

“Living in this shabby house with a man…”

“That… I mean, I'm just…”

Seina's attempt to convey the truth crumbled under Amane's blunt words.

“So what?”

“What?! Are you really living together?!”

Masumi's previously stern expression suddenly crumbled, and he let out a flustered, sorrowful voice.

“Y-You're kidding, right? Of course you are!”

“Sorry to disappoint. It's the truth!”

The exchange was starting to sound childish.

“Father, that's not it. Amane-san and Seina-kun are teacher and student…”

“It's a relationship where they take baths together, complete with maid service, massaging each other's entire bodies from behind and in front, and licking each other.”

Kiriko couldn't help but send Seina a lifeline, but it was Gyokuren, standing by, who capsized it.

Giiii! Kiriko and Karen glared at her, but Gyokuren was already gone.

“N-No way, Amaneeeee!”

As Masumi finally started crying, Karen couldn't hold back and began explaining.

“I apologize for butting in, but that was just for the care and wound disinfection during the familiarization training after the Bio-Enhancement…”

“Really?”

Just as Masumi tried to cling to Karen's persuasion,

“It certainly didn't look like that to me!” Miki pushed the one button she shouldn't have.

“Amaneeeee!!” “Miki-san! Don't you complicate things too!” “I just stated my honest opinion.” “It depends on the time and place, doesn't it!”

“Enough! Shut up, you spectators!”

Amane's sharp rebuke silenced the room instantly. She swept a threatening glance around at everyone, confirmed they were all back in their places, then turned her gaze back to Masumi.

“Let me make this perfectly clear. I have no intention of returning to Kaunaq.”

“You… don't want to go back… don't want to go back…” Masumi fought back tears. “She used to be so sweet and innocent… Do you want to see the old Amane?”

Wiping his tears, Masumi pulled a mobile terminal from his pocket. A 3D photo emerged from it. Everyone gasped at the sight.

“…Cute.”

There, dressed in a luxurious dress covered in frills, was a doll-like Amane with long hair, around ten years old, ridiculously adorable.

“Father… I understand your feelings, but Amane-sama won't remain a child forever. She might have already lost her virginity…”

Just as the room threatened to melt into a state of pure adoration from the power of Amane's childhood holographic photo, Airi's voice suddenly shattered the mood.

Wham! Amane slammed NB onto the table with all her strength. Kiriko grabbed the bouncing NB and ran straight to the kitchen.

“Hey! Wait, I still have questions! Especially about the end part!”

Elma emerged from Kiriko's office at GP Academy with a puzzled expression.

“This is strange. Where did Kiriko-san go? I can't even get in touch with her…”

As she descended the stairs, Elma spotted Kenneth and Rajau, who were about to return to the classroom with Miki's friends.

“You two are Seina-kun's roommates, right? Hey, Kiriko-sensei, have you seen her?”

“Ahhhhhhhhhh, Elma-san! Long time no see!”

Like a puppy finding its owner, Rajau dashed over to Elma. But he wasn't the only one running.

“Wow, she really is white-haired! And gorgeous~~”

“Right, Senpai?”

“Um, I'm Caliche. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, right… I'm Elma. Nice to meet you.”

“Hey Caliche, see how surprised Elma-san is?”

The other friend grabbed Caliche by her collar and pulled her away from Elma.

“Excuse me. In this girl's hometown, the white-haired Wau is a messenger of God and a symbol of good luck. I'm Miranda Martis.”

“Is that so… Hey, have you seen Masaki Kiriko-sensei?” Elma asked, seeming relieved by Miranda's polite response.

“If you mean Masaki-sensei, she ran off with Miki about an hour ago.”

“Miki-san… Could that be Miki Steinbeck-san?”

“Yes, that's her.”

“Oh, thank you. I'm in a hurry now, so I'll take my leave.”

“Ah, Elma-san!”

“Hey, you stop bothering her. We should get back to class soon or we'll miss dinner.”

Like Miranda, Kenneth grabbed Rajau by the collar as he tried to chase after Elma. Kenneth and Miranda, holding onto the struggling Rajau and Caliche, started walking toward their respective meeting points.

“I might know where Miki-san is.”

Elma dashed into Kiriko's office, activated a monitor, accessed the faculty management system, and searched for Miki's location. Within seconds, her position appeared.

“Oh, this is strange. This is outside Academy grounds… Wait, this is Amane-san's penthouse!?”

Elma momentarily lost her bearings. She lightly tapped her own cheek, then accessed the visual cortex of the NB, as Airi had taught her this morning.

“Airi-sama! What the hell are you doing using the NB?!”

The monitor displayed a close-up of Kiriko screaming with a terrifying expression. It was like the shock of colliding head-on with a dump truck.

“Ngyan!!”

Startled, Elma jumped backward and crashed spectacularly into a pile of equipment.

“What?! Airi-sama isn't operating the NB?”

Kiriko realized from Elma's urgent call that her phone was still in stealth mode. She must have switched the setting unconsciously while talking to Miki.

“More importantly, why are you over there? It's almost time to meet.”

“Oh no! I forgot.”

“Miki-san has her afternoon schedule too, so please make sure to bring her back properly.”

“Y-yeah, but… I've got a lot going on over here too.” Kiriko said with a troubled look, keeping an eye on the situation in the living room.

“Kiriko-chan, you can’t.” Airi abruptly interrupted the communication, her expression serious.

“Ah, Airi-sama! But Seina-chan, no, Seina-kun, something very important…”

“I understand the situation. However, your actions constitute a serious dereliction of duty. No matter how much it involves Seina-kun, I cannot accept it taking priority over our mission. Masaki Kiriko Sensei, bring Miki Steinbeck and come to the GP Academy. This is the top priority.”

“R-roger that.”

Given that Airi had issued the order, there was no way to defy it, nor any excuse to overturn it.

“Um, Kiriko-sama…” Karen timidly approached Kiriko, who had slumped her shoulders in defeat.

“About the bathhouse incident, it was my carelessness. I accompanied Seina-sama and Amane-sama to the bathroom to monitor them, but I was told to undress… and then, suddenly, I was thrown into the bath with Seina-sama, and then…”

Seeing Karen looking like a scolded puppy, Kiriko let out a small sigh. Remembering that Karen was a serious and sincere person, Kiriko realized that Karen had ended up in that situation because she had tried to fulfill her duties to the best of her ability. Since she had to leave this place immediately, Karen was still the most trustworthy person.

“All right, I'll leave it to you.” Kiriko smiled, placed a hand on Karen's shoulder, and headed toward Miki in the living room.

“Miki-san. I'll be heading back to GP Academy right away.”

“But are you just going to leave Seina-kun like that?”

It was the exact same reaction Kiriko had moments before. Where Miki's gaze fell, the Kaunaq father and daughter still sat with that unpleasant tension radiating from them, their mother wearing a relaxed smile, and Seina looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“…It's a waste of time to continue talking here. Seina, let's train outside.” Amane took Seina's hand and stood up.

“Then, as teacher and student, I'll make sure you're actually training properly.”

“Get out of the way! Go home already!”

With that, Amane left the living room with Seina and headed out into the garden. Kiriko grabbed Miki's arm tightly as she tried to chase after them.

“Come on, let's go back.”

“Is that an order as a teacher?”

Miki's expression seemed tinged with disdain. Kiriko understood what she was implying and said, “I appreciate you caring about Seina-chan, but from here on out, it's none of your business, Miki-san.”

Kiriko spoke not from authority as a teacher, but from genuine emotion.

“In that case, I'll withdraw for today.” Miki said simply and began walking toward the entrance.

Kiriko followed her with a wry smile, struck by the overly mature, composed reaction.

“Damn it, how embarrassing. Get the hell out of here, you piece of shit old man.” Amane shot a disgusted glance at Masumi, who was glued to the living room window watching them.

“…Um, Amane, Sensei?”

“Ah, sorry… Well then, this time I'll have you do a slightly more complicated task.”

Bricks were piled high in the front yard, along with gardening soil, flowers, and sod. Just like with the building blocks, a translucent blueprint of the finished project was displayed via hologram.

“First, you'll lightly dig holes to secure the block foundation.”

The holographic blueprint indicated the location for the initial step: digging the holes. Seina picked up a shovel and cautiously began digging.

“Ah!”

With his old strength, the blade would have only penetrated a few centimeters into such hard ground. But Seina's shovel easily pierced through to the handle, exceeding the planned depth.

“Don't rush. The goal isn't to finish this anyway.”

“Y-yes.” Seina pulled out the shovel and began digging shallowly into the soil.

“Please, why don't you sit down?”

Karen moved some spare chairs over to where Amane's parents stood by the window. She placed a small table between the two chairs, and Gyokuren set iced tea on it.

“Thank you. …Hey, you… What kind of guy is he?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know… that man's…”

Even Masumi, seemingly overwhelmed by Gyokuren's beauty, looked away as he spoke.

“I'm sorry. In my position, I cannot discuss my master’s private affairs.”

Then, for some reason, Gyokuren handed NB to Masumi and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Whoa, this is the one from earlier… Could it be she wants me to ask this thing?”

Holding NB and looking confused, Masumi looked up at his wife, Nachure.

“What's your name?” Ignoring Masumi's question, Nachure addressed the NB directly.

“For now, I'm provisionally called NB. Nice to meet you, beautiful lady.”

“Well, thank you.”

“Hey, you. About that question earlier… What kind of man is he?”

“Yamada Seina. Like the current First Empress of Jurai, Masaki Funaho Jurai-sama, he's from the frontier planet Earth…”

“No, that's not what I meant…”

“I see. Actually, that gentleman has had relations with every woman living in this house.”

“What?!”

Masumi stared at NB in utter shock at its words. But Nachure calmly stroked NB's head, as if it were a puppy.

“Oh my, what a blunt answer right off the bat.”

“So, so Amane is being deceived after all!?”

“Well, Amane-san is head over heels for that man. This morning she fed him breakfast wearing just an apron, and they even took a bath together…”

“What?! But I haven't been allowed to bathe with her since she was five… And he's just a

minor student who can't even support himself yet…”

“But that guy, on his way to the Academy, he made a huge name for himself capturing pirates. Even the 'Demon Princess of Jurai,' Kamiki Seto Jurai-sama, took notice of him. And just recently, he arrested a bunch of criminals and Widow—he's the rising star of the GP. Plus, he became a millionaire with the reward money from that job.”

“... Oh, he’s the type of man I can't tolerate.”

“Generally speaking, your father is like that too, right?”

“Oh ho ho ho, that's true, isn't it?”

Behind Amane's parents, Karen hesitated, unsure if she should stop NB's questionable answers.

“Um… I know this is presumptuous, but since it concerns Seina-sama's honor, I must say… that explanation from NB contains some exaggeration. Even regarding Seina-sama's relationship with the women of this household…”

“It's fine. Seeing you and that child makes it clear enough.” Nachure smiled at Karen.

“No, I don't believe it! Surrounded by beautiful maids like you and that girl earlier, there's no way a young man like that could stay calm!”

“Even if that's true, so what?”

“W-what do you mean, 'so what'?”

Not just Masumi, but Karen too was left a bit speechless by Nachure's words.

“Look at that girl's face when she looks at Seina-san…” Nachure looked toward Amane in the garden.

Amane, who had been glaring at Masumi just moments ago, now wore a completely calm and gentle expression. She occasionally exchanged words with Seina and laughed happily.

“So natural, so happy. She always seems so grumpy when she sees you, but when she looks at Seina-san, her expression just gets softer and softer…”

“…She's become more feminine…”

Tears welled up in Masumi's eyes as he watched Amane. Seeing the scene Nachure described, Masumi could only realize that Amane had completely flown the nest.

“Hehehe.”

“But isn't he a little too young?”

“It's too early to think about that, but I think the chances are higher than the people you chose.”

Nachure took out a handkerchief and handed it to Masumi, who took it, nodded like a child, and held the handkerchief to the corner of his eye.

“Now that I've seen that girl's cheerful face, I think it's time to go.”

“I will inform Amane-sama that you will be leaving, so please wait a moment.”

Karen felt sorry for Masumi, who looked dejected, and although she thought it was a bit intrusive, she went to ask Amane to see her parents off.

“No, we'll be leaving now.”

“But…”

“Thank you for your concern. Just confirming how she's doing was enough. Please continue to look after her in the future.”

“Yes, understood.”

Bowing deeply, Karen followed Nachure, who was walking as if to support Masumi, toward the entrance.

Amane watched the black limousine-style aircar carrying her parents drive away through the garden fence, a complicated expression on her face. Seina hesitated about whether to speak to her. This was ultimately a family matter, and Seina was an outsider. Moreover, Amane was an adult woman older than him. She might not appreciate being lectured by a younger boy with limited life experience, and she probably couldn't offer Seina any useful advice anyway.

(Maybe it's better to stay silent?) Seina thought. But…

“Weren't you going to see them off in person?”

Seina couldn't bear to leave Amane's sorrowful expression unaddressed.

“…I guess I showed you a pretty pathetic side of myself.”

Amane leaned against the wall, shifting her attention from the highway where her parents' aircar had disappeared, to the sea. The perceptive Amane sensed Seina's inner conflict. While she was glad for Seina's feelings, she also felt ashamed that she had caused the younger boy to think such things.

“Ah, no… not at all.”

“I always get like this when I see Dad. …Heh, I'm a failure as a teacher, huh?”

“I was a bit surprised… but relieved.”

“Relieved?” Surprised by the unexpected words, Amane looked at Seina with a puzzled

expression.

“No matter how advanced science gets, just like the Earth I was born on, everyone cries, laughs… and lives, you know?” Seina lifted his face, his eyes pure, simple, and honest.

Amane felt the fog in her heart blow away completely at that gaze.

“You know, I don't hate modeling.” Amane smiled shyly as she said this, and that smile was the same as the one in the 3D photo her father had kept, the one of her as a girl.

“But no matter how hard I try, as long as I'm a Kaunaq… I can't tell how much of it is my real ability… That's why I joined the GP, something unrelated to being a Kaunaq.”

“Sensei… Do you like your GP work?”

Seina's question: Do you regret choosing to work at GP? Instead, he was really asking Amane how she felt about the trouble he was causing her.

“Just when I was working my ass off to finally become a first-class detective, I got demoted to being a GP Academy instructor… There are a lot of things that don't go my way, you know.”

“I-I'm sorry.”

“But you know… that's exactly why it's interesting and rewarding.” Placing a hand on Seina's bowed head, Amane said with a beaming smile.

“…Yes.” Seina looked up, saw Amane's smile, and nodded happily.

“By the way, Seina's buzz cut… it feels so nice to the touch.”

“Ah, well… Mitoto-sama said the same thing.”

“Hm? …Ahahaha, I kind of get it. To that person, Seina, who attracts bad luck, is like a little puppy.”

But just then, shattering the peaceful atmosphere, a wet white glove was hurled at Seina's face.

“Amane, now that I'm here, you can relax. Yamada Seina! I challenge you to a duel!”

From the direction the white glove flew, Seiryo stood glaring at Seina, seaweed wrapped around him as expected, seawater dripping from him. Amane slowly approached Seiryo, who was pointing sharply at Seina and shouting, her smile unchanged.

“Oh, Amane! You came to help… Zzzng!!”

Seiryo, who had happily spread his arms to embrace the approaching Amane, felt Amane's heavy right fist slam into his abdomen.

“Guh!”

Amane casually kicked the collapsing Seiryo about five meters away. Then, pulling out a railgun that must have been at least two meters long from who knows where, aimed it at Seiryo and began firing relentlessly.

Shushushushushushushushushun!

The firing sound was surprisingly faint, but seeing Seiryo's body bounce around like a rubber ball with each hit made it clear the weapon held immense power.

“Ah, Amane-sensei…”

Ignoring Seina's words, Amane silently tossed the battered Seiryo, now resembling a tattered rag, into a case that had once held gardening tools. She then began filling the case with soil mixed with hardener, burying Seiryo beneath it.

“Heh, still no mercy for Seiryo-sama, huh?” Gyokuren said to Karen, after seeing off Amane's parents.

“It's only natural when someone ruins the mood… But more importantly…” Karen glanced at the NB floating nearby and asked, “What did you do to Seina-sama's NB?”

“Oh, you noticed?”

“There's no way the NB would know about what happened in the dining room this morning. If you keep doing strange things like that, Kiriko-sama will really kill you.”

“Hehe… The tension is rather delightful. But that man is a bit of a nuisance, isn't he? Let's make sure he can't come back for a while. It's part of my duty as a maid.”

Gyokuren narrowed her eyes sharply, and Karen flashed a smile that made her blood run cold. In the garden, Amane was filling a case with soil and sealing it tightly.

“You bastards interrupting at the worst possible moment! Gyokuren, Karen. Take this guy and sink him to the deepest trench on this planet!”

“Yes, understood.” Gyokuren happily dashed toward the shouting Amane.

Back at the Academy, Kiriko was in the principal's office control room with Elma, organizing data sent in from various departments. Since the work procedures were pre-programmed, their roles were mostly just monitoring.

Elma stretched lazily, stood up smoothly, and began operating a nearby pod to brew coffee into two cups. She sipped one and placed the other beside Kiriko.

“Looks like we'll finish sooner than expected.”

“Thanks. Well, the investigation itself was straightforward. The real challenge is the follow-up tracking and re-investigation.”

“That's not our job, is it? More importantly… what did you talk about with that Miki Steinbeck?”

“…Nothing much. She was silent the whole time.”

“Oh dear. Could that be a declaration of war?” Elma leaned closer and asked. She had kept her distance, ready to flee if Kiriko flew into a rage, but Kiriko's surprisingly calm reaction made her curiosity get the better of her.

“It's not that dramatic. Ultimately, this is between them. If she's serious, it's none of my concern.”

“Your opinion of Miki-san seems to have changed quite a bit since this morning. Could it be because you were told she resembles Kiriko-san's mother?”

“My opinion of her hasn't changed. It's her choice to get involved with Seina-kun and risk getting hurt, but I won't allow her to hurt Seina-kun… That's all.”

Elma's expression darkened the moment she heard Kiriko's words.

“You won't tolerate her hurting Seina-kun, huh… Well, I suppose that's fine?”

“What's with you, weird Elma? Are you worried about dragging Seina-kun into trouble? If so, you should be more careful from now on.”

“Hmm… Yeah, I'll be more careful from now on. Oh, no!”

Noticing the sound of the principal's office door opening, Elma quickly sat down at her own desk.

“How did the investigation go?” Mikami asked as she walked straight over to the main operations block terminal where Kiriko and Elma were, peering at the monitor.

“Yes, we’re currently sorting through the data sent from each department, and so far, there don't seem to be any problems. I think we'll be able to finish checking the students by the end of today.”

“Very well. Then it looks like we can resume the normal curriculum the day after tomorrow.”

“Yes. We'll notify everyone by tomorrow.”

—Beep! At that moment, a small warning tone sounded from Kiriko's monitor.

“Th-this girl!”

Elma jumped up from her seat and leaned over to look at Kiriko's monitor when Kiriko suddenly cried out after checking it.

“What's wrong with that student? …Miki Steinbeck… What is this!?”

Elma also gasped in surprise upon seeing the personal data displayed there.

“Ah, that girl is fine.” Surprisingly, Mikami remained calm as she said this.

“Mikami-sama, did you know about this girl?”

“From the entrance ceremony. But Airi-sama said she looked interesting, so I should leave her be, ho ho ho.”

“W-Wait, you're laughing? This is clearly—”

The data Kiriko pointed to indicated Miki's brain was artificial.

“Airi-sama probably paid her respects as an engineer. A fairy tale unique to the Academy.” Saying that, Mikami displayed another piece of data.

“This is… an Astral! So that girl is a Pinocchio.”

“Wow. This is my first time seeing the real thing.”

Kiriko and Elma stared intently at the data.

“That's the situation. I imagine Kiriko-san has somewhat complicated feelings about it.”

AI’s with Astrals had human rights, and like Kirche, she was treated as a human.

“Understood. In that case, I'll just handle things as usual.”

“Then please continue with your work.”

Saying that, Mikami headed back to her desk and resumed her duties as principal. Elma, who had been observing Kiriko's expression for a moment, returned to her seat with a look of understanding and resumed her surveillance.

—But I had no idea he had a daughter… or that he was even married before that.

As Kiriko looked at Miki's data, she remembered Tsukiko's words.

(Well, it's no wonder she looks like mother.)

Kiriko, who now had a rough idea of what had happened between her mother and Miki's father, Hiroshi, in the past, let out a big sigh in her heart.

“……Oh?”

As Kiriko tried to return her attention to her work, she noticed that a small monitor had popped up.

(Notification of receipt completion? Ah!)

It was a notification from the GP Delivery Department confirming the delivery of a valuable

item. Around the same time Kiriko received it, Ringo awoke amidst familiar sights and sounds.

“Oh, are you awake?” Seto peered at Ringo with an incredibly happy look on her face.

“…S-Seto-sama!”

Ringo quickly sat up, immediately recognizing her location as Mikagami's bridge. Surrounding her were Seto and, in stark contrast to her cheerful expression, Minaho and the rest of Ringo's colleagues and subordinates, all looking at her with pitying expressions.

“Ringo, Ringo.”

The sensation of Honoka's terminal landing on her head with a thud finally made Ringo understand her situation. At the same time, she vaguely grasped how things had come to this.

“Could it be… Kiriko-sama?”

“Correct. If you're going to infiltrate enemy territory where your love rival is, you should be a bit more cautious, you know?”

“…Yes, in that tea.” Deducing the reason she was here from the situation in Kiriko's office, Ringo pressed her temples in defeat.

“Still, Kiriko-chan sure is something, isn't she~~. To have understood that situation back then and secured that thing… Truly, when it comes to Seina-dono, all her stats skyrocket. To think such a cute girl could do something so cruel… She's a demon, a demon.” Despite her words, Seto giggled happily, clearly thrilled.

For reference, “that situation” referred to being drugged along with Amane the day before the entrance ceremony. “That thing” was the Shinju Sake that caused it.

“Seto-sama. Laughing like that is a bit much, don't you think? Don’t you feel sorry for Ringo-chan?”

Seeing Ringo slump dejectedly, even Minaho couldn't help but admonish Seto. But as expected, Seto paid no heed to her words.

Instead, she leaned closer to Minaho and Ringo and said, “What can you do? A loss is a loss. More importantly, Ringo-chan, what about your revenge on Kiriko-chan? You're not just going to let it slide, are you?”

“It's a shame I couldn't thank Seina-sama directly, but handing over Widow's assets was our goal this time.”

“Huh? Is that really okay?”

“It would be troublesome to provoke Kiriko-sama and get in Hakuren-san and the others' way… Besides, it seems she has urgent work piling up. If fate allows, I'm sure I'll meet Seina-

sama again someday.” Ringo said with a bright smile, looking incredibly pitiful and heartbroken.

Everyone except Seto couldn't hold back their tears, and sniffles began to escape from those around them.

“Whaaaaaat? That's boring.” Seto said, puffing out her cheeks, shattering the mood.

Everyone's reproachful eyes focused on Seto. Minaho glared at her too. But it was like “pissing on a frog's face” – Seto wasn't about to be intimidated by something like that.

”I thought it was gonna be a little more fun, “ Seto declared calmly.

“Seto-sama! ……Ringo-chan?”

Unable to bear it any longer, Ringo stepped in front of Seto with a cheerful expression, stopping Minaho who was about to reprimand her.

“By the way, Seto-sama. The accounting staff's report mentioned several unaccounted-for expenditures. Could you please explain the details of these?” Ringo's expression shifted like a raging torrent from her usual adorable self to the business mode of the accounting department chief.

“Huh?”

In an instant, Seto's face drained of color. If she were a dog, it would be like her tail, which had been wagging wildly, suddenly went limp and hung between her legs.

“Don’t huh me. I know this unexplained expenditure belongs to Seto-sama. Now… explain yourself. Even though Seina-sama's generosity has given us some breathing room, I won't tolerate wasteful spending, not even a speck of it.”

“Wha-aaaaaat?”

“Now, give me a satisfactory explanation.”

Faced with Ringo's utterly icy expression as she pressed her, this time Seto felt like bursting into tears.

(I, I forgot… this girl, when it comes to money…)

Yes, when it came to money, Ringo's stats skyrocketed.

“Minaho, Minaho. Ringo's scary~~~”

Startled by Ringo's sudden change, Honoka hid behind Minaho's shoulder. Feeling Honoka's small tremors, Minaho gently stroked her.

“Once work's done, she'll go back to being sweet old Ringo-chan. Go back to the ship and wait there.”

“Okay.”

“Mi-Minaho-chan, help me~~~”

Turning her back on Seto's plea for help, Minaho took Honoka and headed for the transfer gate. The maids around them, too, abandoned Seto with cold stares and hurried back to their posts.

Chapter Six: Miki and Seina: Aftermath

That morning, Seina slipped his arms into the sleeves of his uniform for the first time in three weeks.

“It's been a while since I went to the Academy too…”

His daily training after Bio-Enhancement had concluded without issue, and today he resumed commuting to GP Academy. Most of the regular curriculum was done remotely, and Amane and Kiriko had thoroughly drilled him in practical skills to match the Academy's lesson pace, so he wasn't behind at all.

“My biggest problem, my physical strength, has been solved, so I have to work hard from now on.”

“Well then, Mister, it's about time, isn't it? Shall we go?” NB said to Seina as he put his GP hat on.

“NB… Don’t say anything weird at school. This place is supposed to be a secret, you know.”

“I know. It's properly restricted, so even if I wanted to say something, I can't. Don't worry.”

“You do say weird things sometimes, though… Well, Elma-san says it's fine, so I guess it's okay.” He looked at NB uneasily.

“Seina-chan, since you're starting school today, you can't afford to be too relaxed.” Kiriko said as she pushed in a food case for transport.

“Good morning, Seina-sama.”

Following Kiriko, Gyokuren and Karen came in, took out a large table from storage, and began preparing breakfast. As was the norm almost every morning, Elma would arrive just as preparations began, followed by Amane a little later.

Life at the Amane residence began settling down, peaking on the day Amane's parents visited. Of course, the absence of irregular visitors like Tennan Seiryo, Airi, and Miki—sources of trouble—was a major factor. But it was also because everyone was getting used to each other's routines.

Of course, in terms of trouble, Seina's presence was the biggest cause. Yet precisely because he understood the know-how of communal living, he also served as a crucial link, increasing the otherwise dwindling opportunities for individual interaction. Around the time regular classes via communication began, Amane, Kiriko, and Elma started assisting him with his lessons in their respective areas of expertise. The maids, like Hakuren, who were often given various tasks, also began frequenting Seina's room. Ultimately, under the pretext of mutual supervision, Seina's room gradually became the de facto common room where everyone gathered, and it was decided that breakfast would be eaten there.

(Somehow, it feels like a family.)

Though it had only been about three weeks, the atmosphere during breakfast was enough to make Seina feel that way.

“Seina-chan, the dorm reassignments will start in about a week, so get your things ready to take with you. If you need anything else, just tell me and I'll buy it for you.”

“Ah… that’s alright, I'll be fine taking the same things I brought when I came here.”

“The dorm's close to here, so if you need anything, you can just come get it, right? This is your home at the Academy, Seina. Hey, Seina, if anything happens, you can always come back here, anytime.”

That way of speaking sounded remarkably like Amane's father, Masumi. Everyone present shared that thought, but it was obvious pointing it out would only make Amane angry.

“Amane, you’re a teacher at GP Academy! Why are you discouraging your students? Anyway, it’s almost time. Elma, please.”

“Okay, let's go, Seina-kun.” Elma finished her coffee and stood up.

“Have a safe trip.”

With Gyokuren and Karen seeing them off, Elma's aircar drove from the parking lot onto the island's perimeter road, then onto the highway connecting the island to the mainland. The clear blue sky, the vivid tropical sea and coral reefs shimmering aquamarine in the morning sun—it was a breathtaking view, like a top-tier resort.

“That house… it'll feel a bit lonely without you there Seina-kun.” Elma said to Seina, who

was gazing out the window, once they reached the middle of the highway.

“I like that house too. Will you be staying there forever, Elma-san?”

“Yes, I moved out of my previous place. Plus, there's no rent, I don't have to cook, I have a maid to help with all the chores, and the living environment is great, so there's no reason to move. Plus, I've never lived with people my age, so it's really fun.”

“People your age… weren't you together at school or something?”

“Because of the work of the people who raised me… I moved around a lot, so I never went to school. I'd meet the children of work colleagues, but we'd part ways soon after.”

“Is that so?”

“But I never really felt lonely. Everyone was a bit rough around the edges, but they were incredibly kind to me.” Elma answered with a smile. Compared to Seina, who had been shunned by many people around her, she felt fortunate.

“Please come back during your rare days off… Oh, but maybe going out somewhere with friends is more fun?”

“I'll try to come back whenever I find the time… That place is my home.” Seina looked happy and looked towards the island that was hidden in the mountains.

Their conversation came to an end, and time passed in silence for a while.

About ten minutes later, a group of GP Academy students appeared on the sidewalk ahead. Spotting Rajau and Caliche among them, Elma quietly pulled the aircar over to the shoulder, careful not to be seen.

“Sorry, Seina-kun. It might get a bit noisy, so I'll leave you here.”

“Thank you for the ride.” Seina picked up NB and stepped out of the car.

“Take care, then.”

Elma raised her hand and winked, then made a U-turn and drove down a small side street. Just as Elma's car was out of sight, Rajau and Caliche came barreling towards them at high speed.

“Seina-kun!! That was Elma-san in that car just now!”

“Hey, why'd you let her go?!”

“…Um, Rajau, this person is… Gah!”

Just as Seina was about to ask about Caliche, he noticed students with horrified expressions surging toward them like a tsunami from behind the two.

(Oh, I forgot! I live with Amane-san and Kiriko-san!)

Spotting Elroy and Fingu leading the pack, Seina realized the group was Amane and Kiriko's fan club and frantically tried to flee. But Rajau and Caliche clinging to him slowed him down, and he was surrounded by a massive crowd of students.

“Right then, we won't let you escape now. We'll make you spill everything that happened these past three weeks!”

His eyes were bloodshot, thick veins bulging at his temples. His face bore the expression of a father utterly unable to accept the man his beloved daughter had brought home, declaring she wanted to marry him—a man who looked like a complete loser. It was like being surrounded by a bomb ready to explode at the slightest shock, a situation on the verge of detonation.

But then, with a roar even louder than that, a massive herd of tens of thousands of wild boars suddenly burst out from the forest beside them. The students' commotion had delayed their realization, and everyone present was hit head-on by this tsunami of swine. The students' screams and cries were all swallowed up by the boars' hoofbeats, their bellowing, and the thick, choking dust cloud that billowed up.

Three hours later—Five hundred ninety-six students were transported to the large military medical unit hastily set up on the grounds. They were receiving treatment in physical restoration pods installed within a room as large as a major exhibition hall. Since most GP Academy instructors held paramedic qualifications, Kiriko, Elma, and many others were naturally on hand. Additionally, GP medical staff, military medics, civilian doctors, and for some reason even NBs had been urgently mobilized from nearby bases, making the place look like a field hospital.

“Well, well… getting caught up in a mass rampage of Shiba Boars that happens once every few decades… It's fortunate none of them suffered life-threatening injuries.” Mikami sighed heavily as she surveyed the scene.

Standing almost unscathed beside her, Seina hung his head in confusion.

“Still… being right at the center of that rampage and only getting minor injuries, Seina-kun? I suppose you could say that's quite something.”

“S-sorry.”

“Ho ho ho, I'm praising you.” Mikami said with a wry smile to Seina, who kept bowing repeatedly.

“Principal Mikami, everyone has been accounted for.”

“Understood. I'll be right there. Above all, I'm relieved everyone is safe.” Mikami patted Seina on the shoulder and ascended to the central command center one level above.

Waiting a short distance away, Kenneth, Miranda, and Miki approached as soon as Mikami

was out of sight.

“Seeing this mess really hits home that Seina's back, ha ha ha!”

“I'm sorry for putting you all through this.”

“Don't worry about it, don't worry about it. It's good medicine for those idiots.” Miranda said and burst into hearty laughter along with Kenneth.

“This is Miranda. She's my teammate.”

“So, maybe the Wau person who was with Rajau… is also… Miki-senpai's?”

“Yes. That's Caliche sleeping over there.”

In the direction Miki was pointing, the Wau girl who had rushed in with Rajau was sleeping. And just then, Seina recognized the man performing some kind of adjustment at Caliche’s capsule.

“Oh, that guy… is that Miki-senpai's father?”

“Well, he does have a PhD in bioengineering and a medical license, so he was drafted to help. Guess he has to be him useful once in a while.”

“Yes… but…”

The Hiroshi that Seina knew was a somewhat comical, mad scientist, but right now his expression showed the fearlessness of a truly skilled doctor, and even an amateur could see that he was performing his tasks with impressive skill. In fact, this impression wasn't just Seina's; the other doctors nearby also seemed impressed by Hiroshi's skill.

“…Miki-senpai's dad is pretty amazing, isn't he?”

“If only he were always like that. Anyway, staying here any longer we’ll just get in the way. Let's go outside and have lunch… a bit early, but let's go! Miki said happily, pleased by Seina's compliment about her father.

Then, as if deliberately showing off to Kiriko, who seemed aware of them, she hooked her arm around Seina's and pulled her toward the exit.

“Oh my~, that was Miki-san's perfect strike, wasn't it? I thought she'd given up since we hadn't heard from her since then.”

Elma approached Kiriko, who was watching Miki out of the corner of her eye while working, and murmured as if to herself. Kiriko looked up at Elma with a frown, but Elma stopped her with a hand.

“Ah, my work is done, “ she declared triumphantly, folding her arms.

“Done!” Kiriko quickly finished her medical settings and tried to leave.

“Oh? Aren't you going to chase after her?”

“You're still on duty, aren't you?”

Just as she turned away, Kiriko noticed Miki's father, Hiroshi, watching her. Kiriko gave him a casual bow. Hiroshi, his face bright red, bowed back unnaturally deeply as if to hide his embarrassment, then quickly resumed his work, practically hiding behind the capsule.

“Could it be he has feelings for Kiriko-san? His daughter for Seina-kun, and him for Kiriko-san?”

“Not me, my mother. Apparently, they knew each other back in the day.”

Before Elma could jump to unnecessary conclusions, Kiriko disclosed the necessary information.

“Oh, I see.”

With no more material to tease Kiriko about, Elma pouted, looking bored. But she immediately turned at Hiroshi and whispered, “But seeing how skilled he is… I can understand why Miki-san is the way she is.”

“That's true.”

Kiriko sensed something in Hiroshi that reminded her of Seina. It also hinted at what Airi had said—that Miki's caring nature might shift from her father to Seina.

Kiriko started to head in the direction Seina and the others had gone, but immediately stopped in her tracks, changed direction, and headed toward the central command center where Mikami was located.

(…Honestly, how embarrassing. Since that girl didn't interfere with Seina-kun during his Bio-Enhancement training, I suppose I should at least acknowledge this much.)

“Well, we'll go get our lunch, so you go ahead and secure a spot.”

Kenneth and Miranda headed toward the transport port.

“Now, we're going this way.” Miki grabbed Seina's hand and headed toward the walking path leading into the woods.

“Remember the steps we're about to do. It's not that hard, so you should be able to learn it in one go. First…”

The path was made of large paving stones laid in two parallel rows. Miki started walking along the right-hand row. After about ten meters, the two rows merged into a single large paving stone.

“Use this single slab as your marker. Now walk on the left side. When you see the next single slab, switch to the right. Keep alternating like that until you reach the plaza up ahead.” Miki let go of Seina's hand and began to skip ahead lightly.

“Hm, hm-hm… Right.”

As she walked through the sunlight filtering through the trees, humming and dancing, she looked like a forest fairy. Seina stood there for a moment, entranced.

“What are you doing? Hurry up!”

Hearing the clear, dignified voice, Seina quickly chased after Miki.

Catching up, Miki took Seina's hand again and said, “Seriously, do I have to drag you by the hand?”

Miki's expression, as if speaking to a child, was exactly like Kiriko's had been back then. Sensing the change in Seina's expression, Miki peered at him, looking a little sulky.

“Hey, you're thinking about Masaki-sensei right now, right?”

After saying that, Miki turned her face away and started walking away, pulling Seina along.

“Huh?”

Caught off guard by being called out, Seina stumbled. Even with his weight on her, Miki's stride didn't falter, and she kept a firm grip on his hand.

“S-sorry. Um… Kiriko-san… I was thinking about… Masaki-sensei…”

“Seems like we're quite similar, me and Masaki-sensei.”

“Yes, your atmosphere… little mannerisms…”

Noticing the absence of anger in Miki's voice, Seina breathed a sigh of relief.

However, the way her hand was calmly supporting him when he stumbled reminded him of the relationship he had with Kiriko when he was a child.

“Actually, when I saw Masaki-sensei, I was a little surprised too. Probably more so than most people think.”

Pulling Seina's hand, Miki stopped abruptly when they reached the plaza. The plaza was circular, about fifteen meters in diameter. At its center stood a circular stone about five meters across. Surrounding it, arranged like the face of an analog clock, were long, narrow stone slabs laid out in a radial pattern. Miki took Seina's hand again and began walking.

“Now, moving clockwise from here…”

Miki stopped at the cobblestones at about two o'clock, let go of Seina's hand, and began walking toward the center circle. As soon as she entered the circle, Miki suddenly

disappeared.

“Miki-senpai!”

Seina quickly followed, and was enveloped in darkness, feeling like he was floating as he had when he was transported. The next moment, he was thrown back into normal space with a bright light.

“We're here.”

Miki turned to look at Seina and smiled brightly. Beyond where Miki stood lay a geometrically designed, quite spacious European-style garden.

“Miki-senpai… where is this?”

Miki took Seina's hand as he looked around, climbing several steps on the opposite side to reach a wide, stone-paved terrace.

“Wow…”

As Seina approached the terrace railing, the entire view of GP Academy spread out below him.

“Impressed? This is one of several floating islands within the Academy.”

Seeing Seina's expression of astonishment as he gazed at the view, Miki began her explanation with satisfaction.

“The floating islands were created by the Academy's philosophers. Aircraft aren't allowed to approach or land here. The only way to get here is via teleporter. And only people who know the special key pattern, like the one we used earlier, can come here.”

“Wow… that's quite elaborate.”

“The key patterns are passed down from seniors to close juniors, generation after generation. The Academy is full of such special secret gates.”

“So this is Miki-senpai's secret spot, huh?”

“Heh, this one's actually pretty well-known. Look.”

Miki leaned against the railing and turned her back. Seina followed suit, turning around too. Perhaps because they were on higher ground, he could see quite a few students hiding in the shadows of the bushes and under the trees.

“Want to know my secret spot?” Miki whispered into Seina's ear, her breath tickling his skin.

“Huh!? …Um…”

“Hehe, ahahahaha!”

Seeing Seina turn bright red, Miki started laughing.

"……"

"Sorry, sorry. Seeing Seina-kun's reaction is just so funny… Hm?" Miki, who had been apologizing to the silent, bright red Seina, noticed Kenneth and the others appearing from the transfer gate.

"Looks like our delivery's here. Let's go, Seina-chan."

Miki grabbed Seina's hand—still flushed and sulking—and began pulling him toward Kenneth and the others, almost forcefully, like a mother dealing with a sulking child.

"Practical training?" Seina asked Miki as he finished his lunch on the terrace bench and took a sip of tea.

"Yeah, in the second year, we work on actual sites for six months. They assess our final suitability there and finalize a few placement options. The remaining half year, we come back to GP Academy to learn specialized knowledge for each assigned position before graduating."

"Sounds great. I wish I could get out into the field sooner too." Kenneth stood up and struck a gun-shooting pose.

"Kenneth-kun, you're aiming for the Criminal Investigation Division?"

"Of course! I'll become a top-tier detective and wipe out all the scum!"

"…I have a question for someone who's actually experienced rounding them all up. Hey, Seina-kun. What was it like being chased by hundreds of pirates? What was Seto-sama like? What kind of woman was Widow?" Miranda unleashed a torrent of questions.

After all, the Yamada Seina sitting right in front of them was the central figure in numerous scoop-worthy incidents.

"You can't expect him to answer all that at once. Calm down."

Excited, Miranda lunged toward Seina, but Miki grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her back.

"Actually, when we were being chased by pirates… I don't remember much. I was just desperately trying to escape, and in the end, we were saved by the Juraian fleet."

"That's when you met Seto-sama, right? I heard you even went inside Mikagami."

"I looked into it later, but most of what I saw had been made public at some point… Ah, but Seto-sama was much kinder than the rumors made her out to be. I'm only able to be in space thanks to Seto-sama."

“Seeing it on video and being invited to see it in person are worlds apart. Knowing someone so high up there? I'm jealous.”

“Well, Seina himself is originally from the same planet as Jurai's First Empress, Funaho-sama, you know.” Kenneth said proudly, as if it were his own achievement.

Probably, even while Seina was away, they'd been getting excited like this, using Seina as their topic of conversation.

“Meeting Seto-sama is amazing, but meeting Widow is just as incredible, right? And they say Seina-kun made her turn herself in. You wouldn't know since you weren't there, Kenneth-kun.”

“Yeah, like five days after Seina went to Amane-sensei's place, a huge number of reporters swarmed the GP Academy. For about a week after that, they were chasing me and Rajau around too.”

“Oh, I see… Sorry for the trouble.”

“Don't worry about it. We're a team, after all. But it's frustrating, huh? If my stomach hadn't been acting up back then, Rajau and I would've had a close encounter with Widow too…”

“So what was Widow like?” Miranda, excited, pressed Seina again.

“What was she like… Just a normal person…” Seina himself knew that answer was incredibly stupid, far from what Miranda and the others wanted to hear.

Naturally, the reaction from the three upon hearing it was, “Huh?”

They stared at Seina as if he were some strange phenomena.

“But… she just looked like a normal person to me.” Seina tried to recall that moment in as much detail as possible—suddenly being addressed, feeling uneasy, and then a massive structure falling toward them…

“!!”

Seina's pensive aura suddenly altered the surrounding air, and Miki and the other two were struck by an indescribable sense of alienation. It was like being abruptly thrown into zero gravity, accompanied by the horrifying sensation of centipedes crawling all over their bodies.

“H-hey… Seina-kun!” Beads of sweat forming on her forehead, Miki frantically shook Seina.

“Huh?”

The moment Seina regained his senses; the sensation dissipated like mist. Miki and the others were freed from the strangeness and exhaled deeply.

“Enough about Widow already. We kinda get it now.”

Kenneth and Miranda, looking utterly exhausted, nodded at Miki's words.

“…Is that so? Understood.”

“Speaking of which, where did you two decide to do your practical training, Miranda-senpai and Miki-senpai?” Kenneth asked, tense from the strange atmosphere, as he stretched out like a cat to relax his body.

“Caliche and I are assigned to the Delivery Division's administrative office. And Miki… is assigned to the Decoy Division.”

“Huh! The decoy Division… um?”

“Yeah. With Miki, she could handle anywhere… even the Criminal Division with ease. I just don't get why she'd choose such a dangerous department.”

“Dangerous?”

Hearing Kenneth and Miranda, Seina looked at Miki with a worried expression.

“Look, our school is the GP Academy. It's the Galaxy Police Force. If you're talking about danger, the Criminal Division is far more dangerous.” Miki said calmly, her voice loud enough to dispel Seina's unease.

“Well, that's true… But the Decoy Division… it's supposed to be dangerous, yet it somehow feels… plain? Like, it lacks glamour…”

“Dull? Well, sure, the Decoy Division doesn't have visible, clear achievements like catching criminals, but it's a crucial department for delivery operations.”

“Hahaha, I agree, sorry. But it's a shame, I got to know you guys so well, and now I have to say goodbye so soon.”

“So soon? When are you leaving for your practical training?”

“Caliche and I are leaving in a week, but Miki… she's leaving tomorrow.” Miranda said this with a hint of sadness.

“Huh! So suddenly?”

Kenneth and Seina looked at Miki in surprise.

“It would have been sooner if not for the computer trouble. Anyway, I should get back soon.” Miki said with a calm expression, in stark contrast to Miranda. Then she stood up, carrying her lunch box case.

“Miki-senpai…”

“Half a year will fly by. See you.”

With just that simple farewell to Seina, who had been about to say something, Miki pulled

Miranda along and vanished quickly through the transfer gate.

“We're all going to see her off tomorrow, so you can properly say goodbye then. Besides, like she said, half a year will fly by.” Kenneth placed a hand on Seina's shoulder as he stared blankly at the transfer gate where Miki and Miranda had vanished, speaking brightly as if to comfort him.

“Yeah, you're right. Well, we should head back to the classroom soon too…”

“We can go straight to the classroom gate on the way back. The extremists were wiped out in this morning's incident… but still, you don't want to deal with the others' barrage of questions, right? Let's stay here until the last possible moment.” Kenneth checked the time, then stretched out and lay down on the bench.

“But, not to quote Miranda-senpai, it's a shame to part ways so soon after finally getting to know each other…”

“Hey, Kenneth. What exactly does the Decoy Department do? Miki-senpai made it sound like it wasn't a big deal…” Seina sat down next to Kenneth, looking worried.

“Hm? Well… Actually, it's tough for pirates to find transport ships in space. Sure, transport routes are somewhat fixed, so it's not impossible, but without any intel, the chance of encountering one is practically zero. That's why they do such thorough intelligence gathering. If we could shut down all that intel, we wouldn't need decoys at all. Pirates have highly organized intelligence networks to counter the GP, and there are always informants feeding them intel. So it's better to lure them in with false information.”

“So that's what a decoy unit is.”

“Well, since we're intentionally leaking intel, the encounter rate with pirates will naturally be higher compared to normal operations.”

“Then it's still dangerous, isn't it…” Seina peered anxiously at Kenneth's face.

Kenneth opened only one eye, glanced briefly at Seina, then closed it again and chuckled softly. “Look, they wouldn't send a rookie still in practical training to a dangerous place. Besides, even within decoy units, there's a range of roles from hands-on to administrative. Even if you ended up on a decoy ship, the pirates get their participation prize too, so casualties in combat are rare.”

“Participation prize?”

“Empty containers. The ones used as decoys are particularly sophisticated and can be used to transport valuables. They can also be used as building and construction materials, and of course, can be sold through back channels. They're great for this. The customers in those cases are usually the GP, though.”

“Buying back stolen goods?”

“Cheaper than building new ones, and compared to the penalties for losing cargo… it's

peanuts. …That's what Rajau said. …Hm? Think we're good? Let's go, Seina.”

Kenneth swung his leg up, using the momentum to stand, then patted Seina's shoulder and headed for the transfer gate.

Just as Kenneth had planned, they entered the classroom just moments before class began.

It was right after the first afternoon class ended, and a short break had begun.

“They probably won't attack during this short break, right?” Kenneth said to Seina with a laugh.

“Hey, Kenneth… I need to talk to you for a moment.” David from the Ryoko fan club was beckoning quietly from behind the partition. Unlike his teammates Elroy and Fingu, he hadn't been caught up in this morning's commotion.

“Me?”

As Seina glanced at Kenneth, who was heading over to David with a curious look on his face, he noticed the sound of an incoming email coming from his monitor.

(Who could it be?… Miki-senpai!)

After making sure there was no one around, Seina quickly began to read her email.

“Huh, I see…”

“Huh? NB!”

“Oh, no!”

The moment NB closed the email, Kenneth burst back in just as the class start signal sounded.

Hearing that same bell, Amane was yawning loudly in the office.

“You're still on duty. You're slacking off.”

“With this morning's commotion, afternoon classes got canceled too… what can you do? Anyway, Kiriko, do you know where that girl requested to be assigned for training?”

“I know. The decoy division, right?”

“She suddenly changed her preferred department this time… If that's the case, then this is definitely…”

“She's after Seina-kun, no doubt about it!” Suddenly, Airi appeared behind them, clenching

her fists and yelling.

Perhaps they were used to it or had expected it, but Kiriko and Amane didn't seem particularly surprised, and instead just looked at Airi in amazement.

“Airi-sama, what about your work?”

“Listen, showing a little surprise is practically a rule of thumb, you know!” Like a comedy sketch, Airi, who had expected Kiriko and Amane's shocked reactions, pouted in dissatisfaction.

“We're working.”

“Hmm. Well then, how about if you heard Miki Steinbeck was having a secret rendezvous with Seina-kun?”

“Wh-what!?”

Upon hearing that, Amane and Kiriko both stopped working and looked at Airi with a pained expression. But Kiriko instantly realized the information came from NB and reflexively looked at Amane. That split second proved fatal.

“I just got a report from NB. This afternoon… Oh!” Just as she proudly finished that sentence, Airi remembered that Amane didn't know NB had a spy function.

“Well, I did suspect something was up when Airi-sama personally came to ensure NB was up and running properly, and then Kiriko barged in on the second day.” Amane looked at Airi and Kiriko with a faintly amused, exasperated expression.

Airi clenched her fist, forcibly putting the issue on hold, then launched into another rapid-fire barrage of questions. “More important than such trivial matters is Seina-kun! For now, let's get him out of the way! How about we take him into custody before he engages in inappropriate sexual activity?”

“Understood!”

Amane flashed a bright smile, signaling her agreement. The three activated their monitors and each launched their “Operation: Interrupt Seina and Miki's Secret Meeting.”

As the class ended, Seina shut down the monitor he had been using and stood up, carrying his notebook.

“Hey, Seina. Can you hang out with me for a bit after class?” Kenneth grabbed Seina's arm, trying to stop him.

“Sorry, I have something urgent to do…!?”

Seina turned at the sound of people and found his friends packed tightly into the hallway

outside the break room, blocking his escape route.

“Looks like that anonymous email was telling the truth after all.”

“Heh heh heh. Forget meeting Miki-senpai. You're answering our interview questions… Yamada Seina-kun.”

“Wh-why do you know that?”

“We got a tip… to all of your classmates.” David crossed his arms and smiled triumphantly.

However, Seina noticed that there was no one behind him at the fence that led to the atrium of the hallway. To reach the staircase entrance, one had to pass through the hallway, but if you cleared the railing, the stairs were right below. The problem was landing on the stairs—an unstable spot.

(Knowing me, I'd probably fall and tumble down… Wait, that railing!)

The railing was a thick, pipe-like latticework, easily large enough for a person to slip through. Seina grabbed NB, sprinted forward, slid in headfirst, and slipped through the gap at the bottom. Just before falling, Seina grabbed the edge of the floor and steadied himself.

(Yes!)

The stairs were less than fifty centimeters below Seina's feet as he hung from the edge. Instantly judging the distance, Seina let go and landed safely on the stairs.

“Seina-kun, hurry to the transfer gate right next to you!” Without a moment's pause, Miki's voice came through Seina's earpiece.

Seina followed the instructions, descended the stairs, and leaped into the transfer gate below.

“Damn it!”

Stunned by Seina's swift and unexpected movement, the students finally began chasing after him.

×××

“Damn you little brats! Utterly useless!” Airi, monitoring NB, slammed her fist on the desk and shouted. With a red pen tucked behind her ear and the Seina capture plan clutched in her hand, she looked just like one of those old guys you see at the racetrack.

“Airi-sama. That's a bit harsh, don't you think? It depends on the target, but with that kind of initial speed, even professionals could be outmaneuvered.”

“We know his destination. We'll have our ambush team get there first.”

Kiriko calmly issued instructions. On the monitor, several dots representing ambush

personnel appeared along the path of the dot indicating Seina's location.

“Excellent! Huh huh huh, Seina-kun. I won't let you get away this time.”

“Oh? NB's… no, Seina-kun's route suddenly changed. Could he have noticed the ambush!?”

Seina's dot deviated from the destination displayed on the monitor and the predicted route to get there. Amane, who had been deep in thought watching this, looked up as if she'd noticed something.

“Come to think of it, Kiriko. That day… the day my damn old man came… why was Miki-san there too?”

“Huh? …That's… Ah!” Kiriko gasped as Amane's words made her remember something crucial.

At that exact moment, the NB's response vanished.

“What's going on? Why?!”

“I-I'm sorry. That girl… she knows about NB too.” Kiriko muttered awkwardly, looking away from Airi, who had leaned in close enough to bite her.

“Wh-what did you say?!”

“Oh dear… She got me. Ahahahaha!”

“This isn't funny! That little brat!! I'll find her! I'll use Academy's highest alert network, mobilize every GP staff member if I have to—I'll rescue Seina-kun from Miki Steinbeck's clutches!”

Just as Airi was raging, a voice came over the intercom in her office.

“Masaki Kiriko-sama, a delivery for you~~~”

“Yes, coming.”

Kiriko, relieved to have an excuse to escape Airi, opened the door.

“Thank you for your hard work. Who could it be? …Oh!!”

Kiriko glanced at the delivery slip presented by the GP courier, quickly signed for the package, and snatched the special transport case for valuables—a square box about thirty centimeters on each side—from the courier's arms.

After making sure that the delivery man, with a puzzled look on his face, had closed the door, Kiriko removed the multiple, heavy seals that had been placed around the box.

“What the hell? I'm in big trouble now. That little brat packed me up in a box!” Making a lot

of noise, NB came rushing out from inside.

“Hey! Wh-why are you in there?! Ugh, you useless piece of junk!” An angry Airi started hurling whatever she could find at NB.

“What can I do?! I got caught off guard too!” NB started fighting back.

“Oh no, I've been completely fooled…Hey Kiriko, what's wrong?”

“Huh? No, nothing.” She said, but Kiriko's expression was clearly tense.

(NB packed into a delivery box and sent to me… Could this be from Ringo-sama's…?)

At that moment, Kiriko noticed a small message card tucked inside the case.

—I won't do anything to cause Masaki-sensei any worry—

(That girl… Honestly, going this far actually feels refreshing.) Kiriko suddenly found herself amused.

“Damn it, damn that little brat! Now I'll use the Academy's entire high-level surveillance system to find Seina-kun no matter what! Kiriko-chan, assist me with the operation!”

“Airi-sama, please stop. Any further… is in poor taste.”

“Huh?”

Airi was stunned by Kiriko's words, and Amane agreed.

“You're probably right. Well, what can you do? Watching over Seina's youth is part of a teacher's job, after all.”

“Ugh, traitors~~~”

“And you're one to talk? Keep fussing, and I'll expose the reason Minaho-sama was born. “ Kiriko whispered into Airi's ear.

“!!…You're right. Youth is a season that never comes again, ahahahaha.” Suddenly, Airi's attitude flipped completely, and she burst out laughing.

Minaho's birth was the result of the pure, yet impure romantic entanglement Airi and Masaki Yosho Jurai got themselves into during their student days.

“…So, Kiriko-chan, who… did you hear that from?”

“From Minaho-sama herself. She said to use it if Airi-sama was causing trouble.”

Miki walked ahead of Seina, silently leading him deeper and deeper into the forest. Seina looked around anxiously, keeping a close to but not too close behind Miki.

“Um, Miki-senpai. Where did you send the NB after packing it up? And before that, why did you have to do something like that…”

“The place we're going now is a secret from everyone else. No matter who they are.”

“Uh, okay…”

Seeing Seina's unsatisfied expression, Miki stopped and turned back.

“Heh. You don't need to overthink it. It's just a little traditional student prank at the Academy… a sort of ritual. And don't worry, I sent your NB to Masaki-sensei's place.” With that, Miki started walking again.

(…Huh?)

Miki noticed that Seina's footsteps following behind her had changed slightly. It was something she might not have noticed if the forest hadn't been so thick with grass.

Ever since entering the forest, Miki had been slightly bothered by the sound of Seina parting the undergrowth behind her. Compared to Miki's own footsteps, it was significantly quieter and more intermittent. At times, it almost created the illusion that the person following wasn't human at all. Each time this happened, Miki would turn around to confirm Seina was still there, as if to dispel her unease. But now, though the sound was still faint, the footsteps themselves were perfectly normal compared to earlier.

(So… this sound is like the wild animals we encountered several times in the forest…)

Miki realized that Seina's footsteps were the sound of someone walking while keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings.

(So, before we started talking just now, was he wary of me?)

Miki glanced behind her, careful not to let Seina notice. Seina was clearly walking while keeping watch, looking around here and there. However, it didn't seem tense; it was done very naturally.

“Hey, Seina-kun, is it hard to walk in the forest?”

“Huh? No, I used to live in the countryside, so I'm used to places like this. Walking like this is normal for me.”

“Okay. Just a little further, hang in there.”

Suddenly, the trees parted, revealing stones laid out in the same pattern as that walking path. The spot felt like a decaying ruin deep in the forest, covered in moss, with weeds growing freely through the gaps between the stones.

“Is this the place that leads to it?”

“No, this is also a path that leads there. There are similarly shaped key circles everywhere,

not just on the promenade or here. So, first let's go to the front of that circular plaza using the same steps we took to get to the floating island.”

Miki took the lead and began walking down the path. When they reached the entrance to the circular plaza, she started walking clockwise around it, just as before.

“The difference from before is that we'll circle around here one extra time, then enter the center from the three o'clock direction this time.”

Following the teleported Miki, Seina stepped onto the central disk.

As the light faded Seina saw the same dimly lit forest as before. The only other things present were the one-meter-wide, disc-shaped stone he had been transported to, and a stone pillar about a meter tall visible behind Miki.

“Sorry for making you take such a roundabout way. This is the gate leading to our destination.” Miki explained before Seina could ask questions.

Honestly, Seina had imagined a much more spectacular place and let out a sigh of relief inside.

“Heh.” Miki chuckled softly and placed her right hand on the stone pillar.

—Kiiiiin.

A clear sound, like a crystal wind chime ringing, accompanied the stone pillar as it began to emit a faint glow.

“Seina-kun, could you place your right hand next to mine?”

Following Miki's instructions, he slowly placed his hand on the mirror-polished rectangular cross-section of the stone pillar.

“This site requires biometric registration. It won't work unless you're with someone who's registered before... Once you've authenticated, you can jump right in, see!”

A different sensation from previous transfers—a feeling of floating. Seina, noticing the touch of Miki's hand, slowly opened his eyes.

The place was even darker than the forest they'd just been in. Looking up, he saw thin, zigzagging flashes of light like

lightning.

“Come this way.”

Guided by Miki's gentle voice and her warm, soft hand, he began walking through the darkness. With each step forward, a faint light began to appear, gradually growing brighter. Only then did Seina realize where he was: a narrow alley at the bottom of a sheer cliff. The zigzagging light he had seen above was the sky visible from the cliff's edge.

“If it only looks like a thin line, that means it's a pretty high cliff.”

Seina instinctively looked out for anything falling from the cliff, but Miki enjoyed the subtle, almost frightened reaction she sensed in her hand. It aroused her desire to protect him, like a trembling, lonely puppy, but at the same time, it stimulated her sadistic desire to be a little mean to him.

(Seina-kun has a habit of always being wary of his surroundings because of his biased probability. When he entered the forest, I think… he was also on guard. It's understandable that Masaki-sensei, who has been watching over Seina-kun since he was little, has become so possessive that it's almost neurotic.)

Miki stopped just before the exit, trying to suppress the urge to show him her favorite spot right away. For Seina, safety mattered more than the impact of the scenery in a new place. Especially transitioning from a dark, poorly visible area to an open space flooded with strong sunlight required time for his pupils to adjust. That split second was dangerous for Seina.

Of course, Seina was accustomed to handling such situations. But avoiding unnecessary danger was always preferable.

“Okay, we're here.”

Miki released Seina's hand and stepped outside slowly. As expected, Seina waited in the alleyway for his eyes to adjust to the light.

As Seina's eyes adjusted, a grassy field and flower garden came into view through the narrow slit-like gap. Seina stepped forward slowly and cautiously, stepped outside.

“…Whoa, wow…”

As the view opened up, the scene resembled a watercolor painting on a strip of Japanese paper, its colors suddenly bursting into vivid life. Against the backdrop of the cool air and the meadow's vibrant new green, an overwhelmingly diverse array of flowers shone with brilliant hues, while sunlight dancing on dewdrops created a dazzling spectacle.

“Welcome, Yamada Seina-kun.” Miki said with a smile so bright it seemed ready to overflow. Her glossy black hair, contrasting with the vivid colors of the landscape, fluttered in the wind, reminiscent of a heavenly maiden from a utopian paradise.

“I-I'm sorry to intrude.”

His expression must have been utterly dumbfounded, for Miki suddenly broke into a radiant smile.

“I'm glad you like it. “With that, she pressed her head against Seina's shoulder and burst into laughter.

Seina looked around the surroundings awkwardly, waiting for Miki's laughter to subside.

They were at the bottom of a huge hole, surrounded by nearly vertical cliffs. However, since the hole itself was carved into the mountainside, the cliffs gradually became lower the farther they went toward the opposite side. Because of this, sunlight streamed down into the hole's depths.

“It's a beautiful garden, isn't it?” Seina said to Miki when she finally stopped laughing and lifted her head.

“It is a garden, I suppose. Just watch.”

Miki stabbed a nearby stick into the ground. It pierced the soil easily, and water began seeping out from the hole.

“Water? Miki-senpai, this is…”

As Miki moved the stick, scraping through the soil, clear water and an impressive white lakebed shone brightly in the sunlight beneath.

“Everything you see that looks like grass is actually growing on top of the lake. This is a colony of aquatic plants. And all the Kuruuru flowers blooming right now are the same species.”

“All of them?”

Even though Miki said that it was hard to believe they were all the same species—the shapes, colors, and sizes of the flowers varied so much. Of course, Earth also had plants and creatures of the same species that looked different. But even within a small area, Kuruuru flowers were so diverse that finding two identical ones seemed nearly impossible.

“Miki-senpai, the Kuruuru flowers…”

“I don't know the details either. But what matters here is just that they're beautiful.”

Miki gave a small wink. It was like admiring a beautiful painting and being told something about the art materials, how to combine these colors, etc. Miki was simply showing Seina around this place as a beautiful, special place.

“I'm sorry.”

“There are a lot of things I want to talk about, so let's go somewhere a little quieter.”

Miki took Seina's arm and pulled him along somewhat forcefully, walking along a stone path

about two meters wide set along the cliff.

They turned around a small cape-like point and saw a rather large, elongated rock peeking out of the water about twenty meters offshore. Several trees grew on the rock, giving it the feel of a watercolor painting of a deep, secluded mountain valley.

“Are we going over there?”

“Isn't it interesting? It's a pavilion carved out of a single rock.”

Miki let go of Seina's hand and began crossing a stepping-stone-like bridge toward the pavilion. But looking closer, it wasn't actually steppingstones—it was rectangular stones laid seamlessly together. Moss-covered stones were interwoven with a lighter-colored stone to create the illusion of steppingstones. The lighter stones probably had some treatment to prevent moss growth.

“Such intricate craftsmanship… Oh!”

Near the pavilion, the water surface was free of the water plants, and it seemed quite deep. The white sand at the bottom shimmered. Fish were abundant; many dark shadows swam around the bridge's supporting pillars, occasionally flashing silver scales.

“Whoa, fish!” Seina peered into the water like a small child.

“Heh, come on, don't get too close to the edge, it's dangerous.”

Miki, who had been watching Seina with a smile, pulled Seina's hand with a little more force, like a mother tugging a child who had stopped moving in front of a toy, and led him up the stairs toward the gazebo.

The interior of the pavilion was surprisingly spacious. Aside from a floor area of about twenty tatami mats and a bench running along the inner wall with a depth of just under a meter, there was nothing else. Miki tugged Seina's hand urgently, leading him up the stairs at the far end of the floor.

“Wow…”

As they climbed the dim, tunnel-like staircase, the view suddenly opened up, and a panoramic scene burst into view before them. The second-floor section of the pavilion seemed naturally hollowed out, offering an almost 180-degree view completely unobstructed by pillars. The sheer walls that had enclosed this space abruptly ended as if they collapsed, revealing the sea and numerous islands beyond, and in the distance, a mountain range mostly covered in snow.

“Do you like it?” Miki wrapped her arm around Seina's and pressed her body close.

“Of course. By the way, where exactly is this in relation to the Academy?”

“This is paradise, the land of dreams. It's rude to pry into such things. Just be careful, though—there's about a six-hour time difference from GP Academy here.”

“I see… That's why it felt a bit off.”

Bathed in dazzling blue sunlight, the colors and atmosphere of the scenery were truly refreshing. While it was nearing evening at GP Academy, here it was still morning.

“Once the flower season ends, you'll be able to enjoy a slightly different view.”

“The flower season?”

“The Kuruuru flowers will be at their peak for about another month. Once they're gone, the grass on the water's surface will wither and disappear almost entirely… and then, well, that's something to look forward to. See for yourself.”

“What?! No way!”

“No matter how much I explain, it can't compare to seeing it for yourself. Oh, right. Seina-kun, you were watching the fish earlier, weren't you? When the grass withers, it produces lots of little fruits about a centimeter long. Some of the fish here eat them. The fish that make those their main food source become incredibly delicious. If you catch one, try eating it. But remember, taking fish out of here is prohibited, so you have to cook it right here. And the fruits themselves are tasty too.”

“Wow… that sounds fun… Oh, but other people can't come in here, right…?” Seina's cheerful expression clouded over slightly.

“That's right. It would be fun if we could invite everyone, but I'll take you there in the fall. Besides, the neighbors are here too.”

Miki pointed to a massive rock, about a hundred meters away, similar in size to the one Seina and Miki were on. That rock was also connected to the shore by a bridge.

“This pavilion is supposed to be a shared space for people who come here. But currently, only about ten people are registered, so you'll hardly ever run into anyone. The ones I see often are a young woman and probably her boyfriend. They seem to like the pavilion next door. Others come to harvest the Kuruuru fruit when it's in season or to fish. Those folks stay overnight, but they camp in tents, so for now, this place is basically ours. When we meet, they bring us fruit or fish, so we offer them tea.”

“Huh, I wonder what kind of people they are. I'm looking forward to it.”

“…I only saw them from a distance, so I'm not sure… Look.” Miki leaned out slightly and pointed.

“……That's… A Juraian house!?”

Hidden behind the neighboring pavilion, only half visible, stood a distinctive wooden house surrounded by giant trees.

“Someone seems to visit there occasionally too, but you can't walk there, and nobody knows anything about the people who live there. It probably has a private gate or

something. Sure, you could get close by swimming or boat… but you shouldn't do that.”

Like an older sister admonishing her younger brother, Miki tapped Seina lightly on the forehead.

“Understood, Miki-senpai.”

“Very well.” Miki said with satisfaction, then turned back toward the lake.

The refreshing morning sunlight and sweet air, the light reflecting off the water illuminated the pavilion and Miki and Seina. The rippling water patterns looked like a masterpiece without a frame. Just gazing at that scenery, it felt like a day could pass in an instant, such was the peacefulness there.

“Hey, Seina-kun. Could you handle something for me regarding my father?” Miki asked abruptly, her gaze drifting absently over the scenery.

“Miki-senpai's father?”

“It's not that I want you to take care of him or anything. He's usually fine, and the biggest worry is gone thanks to you, Seina-kun. It's just… well… I'd like you to check in on him sometimes.”

(Ah, right. Miki-senpai’s is a family of two. And now she won't be able to see him for half a year…)

“I know I'm always bothering Seina-kun… but there's no one else I can ask! …So…”

Uncharacteristically for Miki, her eyes looked vulnerable and clinging. It was, as she herself said, a selfish wish. Especially since she'd only just met Seina and hadn't known him long enough to call him a friend.

(That's why she told me about this place in the first place…)

Miki felt so ashamed she could have cried. But for Seina, that feeling alone was enough.

Just like Kiriko, Seina was saved by the same feelings as Miki. It was Kai who brought Seina, a troublemaker no match for Miki's father, to their home. It was Kiriko and her mother, Tsukiko, who accepted him and protected him without compensation. It was also the people of Masaki village and the Masaki family.

“Miki-senpai's dad might drag me into some weird bad luck again… but if you're okay with me, leave it to me.” Seina said as strongly as he could, trying to give Miki strength.

“Thank you, Seina-kun.”

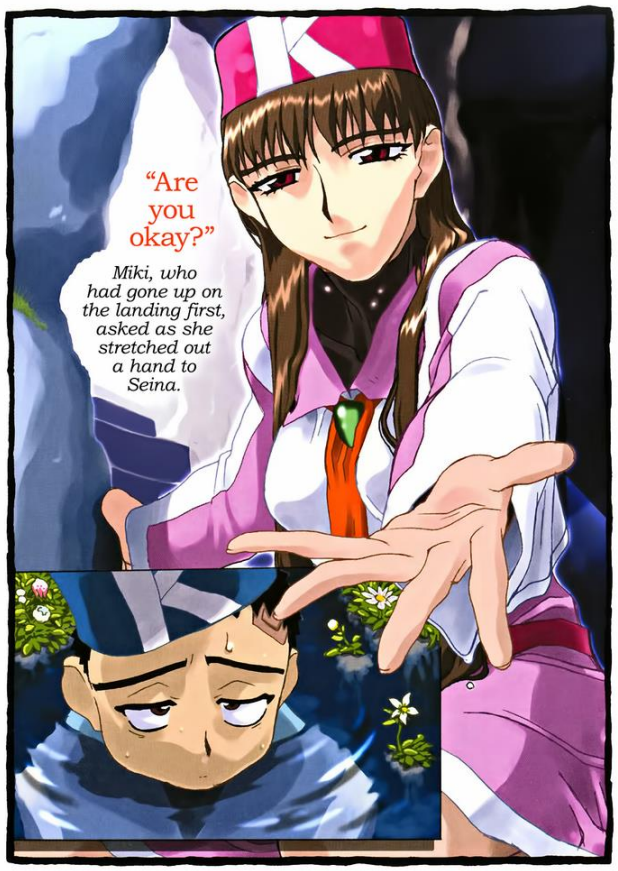
Overwhelmed with emotion, Miki felt tears welling up. Clinging to Seina and crying on his chest might have made for a fitting final scene, but Miki couldn't shake the feeling that such an act would be exploiting Seina's weakness.

Not wanting him to see her tear-stained face, Miki flopped down onto the railing, lifted her legs, turned her body halfway, and then jumped straight into the lake.

“Mi-Miki-senpai!”

Seina instinctively lunged forward to grab Miki—but he was just a split second too late. And just as expected, Seina’s momentum carried his over the railing, following Miki into the lake with a spectacular splash.

“Are you okay?” Miki, who had already climbed back onto the pavilion, asked while reaching out a hand to Seina.



”That's what I should be saying. You startled me by jumping in like that!”

“Well, I can't swim here this year, so I just… But it's still a bit too cold for swimming, isn't it?”

Perhaps the cold water had refreshed her, as Miki's expression had returned to normal.

“Why not swim next year?”

“But next year, Seina-kun won't be here.”

At Miki's casual remark, this time Seina felt like crying.

Seina placed his hands on the edge of the gazebo and submerged himself in the water. It was to gather momentum to climb out and to hide his teary eyes. Shaking his head underwater to clear his mind, Seina propelled himself up onto the gazebo using only his arm strength.

“So you don't need help?”

Miki held out her hand toward Seina with a slightly pouty face.

“No, no… that's not it.”

“Fine. Instead, get me some Kuruuru fruit and whatever fish are in season right now. Freeze them for me. I want to eat them the moment I get back. The storage is over here.”

Entering the first-floor room of the pavilion, Miki descended the stairs. The slightly chilly, dimly lit basement served as a small storage area. Miki grabbed two bath towels, handing one to Seina while using the other to dry her own hair.

“Feel free to use anything here. Replenish consumables after use, and put anything you don't want others to touch in the containers with a biometric key. Everything you need for daily life is set up here.”

After drying her hair, Miki took the towel from Seina, who had finished drying his, and tossed it into the laundry system. Just as Miki had said, the space was crammed with the same systems he’d had seen in the dormitory.

“Got it.”

“Well, let's head back soon. If we stay too long, Masaki-sensei will get angry, and I need to prepare for tomorrow.”

“Ah!”

Seina remembered that tomorrow would be his last day with Miki, and his expression clouded for a moment. But he immediately broke into a cheerful smile and said, “Miki-senpai, may I see you off tomorrow?”

“Of course. You should be able to find the time and meeting place on the GP Academy website.”

Climbing the stairs, the two emerged from the gazebo with Miki leading the way.

Silently, as if savoring their time together, they walked slowly, neither too close nor too far apart, heading toward the valley with the transfer gate as if etching every detail into their minds. For Miki, it was like taking a deep breath before diving underwater. She was carving out vivid, unforgettable memories—ones that wouldn't fade—to sustain her through the next six months in an unfamiliar workplace.

“Alright. Let's do this!” Miki placed her hands on her hips, stood tall, and shouted when they reached the valley entrance.

Then, just as she had when they first arrived, she grabbed Seina's hand and started running toward the gate.

By the time they returned to GP Academy, dusk had already fallen, and stars were beginning to twinkle on the side opposite the setting sun. After parting ways with Miki, Seina used the transfer gate to move directly to the highway entrance connecting the island where Amane's apartment was located to the mainland.

Hesitating to go straight home, Seina ran lightly along the pedestrian path on the highway back to the island to calm his excited mood. The melancholy of the setting sun soothed Seina's heart.

“Welcome home.”

When the elevator doors opened, all four maids—Hakuren and the others—were waiting to

greet Seina in the front garden. Neither Amane nor Elma were among them, nor was Kiriko, who was the one Seina worried about most.

Just as Seina was about to breathe a sigh of relief,

“Hey, hey, boss, did you kiss that girl? Or did you go all the way…” NB burst out from behind the maids, asking the question Seina dreaded most.

Kiriko, rushing out from the entrance to stop him, delivered a perfect kick that sent NB flying high into the sky.

“Honestly, that guy!” Lowering her leg, Kiriko glared up at the sky where NB had flown off, muttering venomously.

Hakuren, staring dumbstruck at Kiriko, called out to her with a troubled expression.

“Um… Kiriko-sama?”

“Huh… Ah!”

She had completely forgotten that everyone had been discussing how to greet Seina normally. She couldn't stand NB's—well, Airi's, to be precise—insensitive words and had rushed out.

Kiriko, her face bright red, glanced alternately at Elma holding her head, Amane trying to stifle her laughter, and Hakuren looked perplexed. After catching her breath, she steeled herself and looked at Seina.

“S-Seina-chan… um… welcome back.”

“I'm home…” Seina looked down, troubled, and answered softly.

But Kiriko felt something off about Seina, who was unnaturally averting her gaze and blushing bright red. This situation was incredibly embarrassing for Kiriko, but it wasn't something that should make Seina react this strongly.

(Could it be…?)

The only possible reason Seina couldn't look Kiriko in the face was that something had happened with Miki.

“You must be hungry, right? I'll get dinner ready right away. Go ahead and take a bath to wash off the sweat.” Kiriko desperately suppressed the urge to confront Seina, forcing herself to appear calm.

“Yes.”

Seina avoided eye contact with Kiriko and the others, briskly passing by them and rushing into the house as if escaping.

“Kiriko-san… Seina-kun's behavior just now… it's a bit concerning, isn't it?”

“Could it be that girl and…”

Elma and Amane watched the direction Seina vanish in with serious expressions, voicing Kiriko's unease aloud.

“W-Well, I… I believe in Seina-chan!” Kiriko cursed her own insensitivity as she shouted, trying to drive away her unease.

“Kiriko, your voice is shaking.”

“Amane, you're a teacher too, right? So how can you not trust those two!”

“I get that you don't want to admit it. But no one can stop the passion of youth. Especially when they're alone together… Gah!”

Kiriko, nearly driven mad, slammed NB—who had returned unnoticed and was about to voice her worries—hard onto the ground. As Kiriko kicked at the hole, easily a meter deep, filling it in, Hakuren approached her quietly.

“Um… Kiriko-sama. I think Seina-sama's strange behavior is due to something else…” Hakuren said, then glanced at Kiriko's skirt and added, “When you kicked NB earlier, it was right in front of Seina-sama.”

“?!… No way!!” Kiriko realized the meaning of Hakuren's words and flushed bright red, clutching her skirt.

“I see. You're something else, Kiriko. Using your mature charm to compete with that little brat… I'm impressed.”

“But Kiriko-sama, you seem quite flustered… Could it be… you weren't wearing any?”

“Gyokuren, you idiot!”

Karen and Suiren covered Gyokuren's mouth and pinned her down. Before Kiriko could recognize them as targets, they used Hakuren as a shield and fled inside the house. However, Kiriko didn't get angry; she just fidgeted nervously, preoccupied with her skirt.

“What's up, Kiriko? Did you really not have any on?”

“Of course I was wearing them! Don't call me a pervert!!”

“Ha ha ha. Well, at least we know the reason now.”

“It's not good! Looking like that… in front of Seina-chan…”

“Let's just go inside. Voices carry well at night. If we keep shouting like this out here, we'll disturb the neighbors.”

Amane patted Kiriko's shoulder lightly, as if to calm her down, then pulled her along, her

arm around Kiriko's shoulder.

By the time they finished eating and were drinking tea in the living room, the house had returned to its usual calm.

“Hey, Seina, you're going to see that girl off tomorrow, right?”

It seemed like a casual question, yet it voiced everyone's doubts while also touching on a taboo subject. However, Amane's carefree demeanor effortlessly shattered that wall of taboo.

“Oh, yes. I just heard that Miki's teammates, Kenneth, and Rajau are also going.”

Seeing Seina's carefree smile, Kiriko, Hakuren, and the others all breathed a silent sigh of relief. They exchanged glances as if to confirm this, and then Amane spoke again.

“Tomorrow, even though it's a small group, it's the first batch heading out for the practical training, so there's a send-off ceremony. Plus, there are no classes in the morning, so we're going to see them off too.”

“So Amane-san and the others are coming too?”

“Teachers have ceremonies to attend, so it's different from individual send-offs, so we can't go together. Well, you probably have things you want to talk about with your friends anyway.”

“Seina-chan. That's why we'll be leaving here a bit earlier tomorrow, so get some rest.”

“Yes, I will.”

After a day packed with events, even Seina was thoroughly exhausted. After bathing and eating, a sudden wave of sleepiness washed over him. Nodding at Kiriko's words, he headed to his room.

Lying down on his bed, Seina stretched widely, then fell asleep instantly, like a switch had been flipped.

“What? He's already asleep… Still, that girl… I can't stop thinking about her.”

NB checked the entrance, then transformed into human form. Covering Seina with a blanket, she gazed at her sleeping face.

“Please sleep well tonight. I'm sorry… but today, I just don't want to see your face.”

Speaking in Kirche's voice, NB smoothly returned to its spherical form and moved back to its usual spot on the desk. The room lights went out, and silence enveloped Seina's room.

Chapter Seven: Darkness

A week had passed since seeing Miki off.

Parting with Miki had been surprisingly straightforward. Though called a six-month practical training program, it was essentially just another part of the curriculum—like an extended school trip. In fact, more students were there to see her off because they wanted to skip class. With yesterday's departure of Miranda and Caliche's group, all second-year students had now set off for their respective departments to begin their practical training.

“Seina-kun, how are you? I'm currently…”

Seina was sorting through his moving boxes for the dorm while watching Miki's video message.

He'd received two messages from Miki: one confirming her safe arrival at her assigned department, and another announcing her departure for her first assignment. Unfortunately, due to the time difference and work hours, they couldn't talk directly, but seeing Miki looking so energetic brought him relief.

“Guess I'm saying goodbye to this comfy home. From living in a mansion with meals served on a silver platter and gorgeous maid-sans, to some rabbit hutch full of gruff guys… I wonder if my delicate sensibilities can handle it?”

“You've… grown into some weird character, haven't you? Is it the environment? Or that 'Top 100 Old Men' thing Amane-san installed? But if you don't want to, you don't have to come along. I don't absolutely need you right now, and I'm fine as long as I have the terminal.”

“I'm sorry, it was just a little joke. So… please, don't abandon me, Seina-san!”

Seina looked at NB, who was clinging to him with Airi's genuinely desperate voice, with a look of confusion.

“Alright, I'll take you… but please stop using Airi-san's voice in Standard Japanese.”

And then, “Seina-chan, it's almost time to leave. Are your bags ready?”

Kiriko, Amane, and Karen entered through the open door, knocking first.

“Ah, yes. Sorry, but could you transfer this case for me?”

Just as Seina pointed to the case beside his bed, the NB suddenly emitted a strange sound and began to glow.

“…Help, h-help me… someone… this…”

“NB!?”

NB began transforming into a humanoid form, clinging to Seina, taking on the shape of a woman.

“H-hey NB… Are you broken?!”

“No, something's wrong!”

“Someone… help me…”

As Seina and the others watched, NB's form and voice changed into Miki's, then froze solid like a statue.

“Kiriko-san, Amane-san!”

Before anyone could fully grasp the situation, watching NB transformed into Miki's form, Elma hurried over and whispered something to Kiriko and Amane. Immediately, the two left the room without a word.

“Elma-san, NB is… And Kiriko-san and the others?”

Elma didn't answer Seina's question, instead pulling NB away from the stunned Seina.

“Karen-san, I'll take care of the rest. I'll take Seina-kun home.”

Leaving Karen with a bow, Elma practically dragged Seina out of the room.

(That form and voice of NB… It was definitely Miki-senpai's… What’s going on?)

Inside Elma's aircar, Seina replayed the events from earlier. An uneasy feeling wouldn't leave his mind, and sweat beaded on his back, forehead, and palms.

“Elma-san, what on earth happened? What’s with NB's form?” Desperate to shake off the bad feeling, Seina looked at Elma as if clinging to her.

“Seina-kun…” Elma was surprised by Seina's near-panicked state.

Seina was usually exceptionally resilient to trouble, thanks to his innate qualities. At least, as far as Elma knew, she had never seen him this shaken before. But the expression on the Seina before her was that of a boy his age.

“I don't know the details either. I was just told by GP Academy that there was an emergency recall and to bring Seina-kun back to the dorm immediately.”

“Emergency recall? …Could it be about Miki-senpai? Hey, Elma-san, you know, right? What happened to Miki-senpai?”

Just as Seina expected, Elma knew the facts. But she hesitated about telling Seina, who was more shaken than ever before.

(Sooner or later, he'll find out when he gets to the dorm… And then there's that thing with the NB…)

Elma stopped the aircar and stared intently into Seina's eyes. She was gauging whether Seina could handle what she was about to say.

That moment caused Seina's agitation to subside almost instantly. Astonished by his mental fortitude, Elma started the aircar moving again.

“Seina-kun. Once you get to the dorm, you'll definitely end up talking about all sorts of things with your friends… And then, well, as a result of those discussions, some people will decide to leave GP Academy.”

“Huh?”

“…About six hours ago, a mobile relay station ship belonging to the Decoy Division's Second Section was attacked by unknown assailants. The first GP ship sent for rescue was destroyed by the attackers. By the time the second rescue force arrived, it was all over. There were no survivors inside the mobile relay station. Zero responses from escape pods… In other words, total annihilation.”

“An… annihilation?”

“Yes.” Elma took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled as if to steady her nerves.

“…And there were three GP Academy trainees dispatched there. One of them was Miki Steinbeck-san.”

“!!……”

Seina didn't know how to process that sense of loss. A force that felt like all the blood in his body was boiling up instantly overwhelmed him, along with the frustration and discomfort of not being able to release it. He couldn't grasp any emotional foothold, flailing helplessly in the void of empty space, unsure what to do or how to react.

“Elma-san, NB… what exactly was that? Could it be that Miki-senpai is still alive…”

“During accidents or pirate attacks… well… various personal messages from the crew members get sent too. Since ultra-high-speed communications prioritize official business, personal messages can only be sent via regular channels, so they can take an extended amount of time to arrive. Apparently, among the messages GP HQ intercepted, there was one with the same content as the one that reached NB.”

“Personal messages…”

Seina recalled seeing news reports on Earth about hijacked planes where family members received calls from the passengers' cell phones.

“…No way.”

Seina recognized it as fact and grew irritated with himself as he regained his composure.

(Why? Miki-senpai is dead. Why am I not sad?)

Just then, he remembered the words Miki had spoken in that secret place.

—Hey, Seina-kun. Could you please take care of my dad?

(Ah!)

Seina remembered someone who would suffer far more grief than he ever could. Miki's father, Hiroshi, would endure a shock incomparably greater than his own. Just as Seina felt unable to grasp any emotional anchor, something seemed to touch his hand.

Thinking of Miki's words and Hiroshi, tears suddenly welled up in Seina's eyes.

"……"

Seina silently wept, pressing his arms against his overflowing tears. Beside him, Elma bit her lip so hard blood dripped from it.

【Tenchi Muyo! GXP Volume 4: The End】

Afterword

Thank you all for your patience. Here is Volume 4 of GXP.

Volumes 2 and 3 have been released at a rate of one per year, and it seems this pace will likely continue. Of course, I consider this the absolute minimum, so I'm striving to pick up the pace even slightly.

Now, to be honest… I don't really have anything to write in the afterword. So…

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Afterword Theater

It was one night, several weeks after Seina had arrived at Amane's residence.

"Kiriko-san, what's the time difference between here and Earth?"

"Time difference?… Well, at this time of year it's about 30 minutes. On the Academy's home planet, we're about 24 hours behind Earth every year, so after six months, the days of the day and night are reversed."

“I see. Thank you.”

“But why?”

“I thought I should contact home soon. Well, I'll head back to my room.”

Saying that, Seina didn't notice Kiriko starting to say something and dashed up the stairs.

“Hey, Seina-chan… …Oh, never mind.”

“What is it, Kiriko? You still haven't told Seina about that?” Amane, sitting on the living room sofa, looked up from her magazine.

“Huh? …Yeah, well…” Kiriko smiled awkwardly and looked toward Seina's room again.

“If there's almost no time difference, it's just the right time.”

Seina sat on the bed and turned on the monitor. Then, recalling the time he had called his parents' house before, he began typing on the keyboard.

But seconds later, the display on the monitor showed…

“Call rejected? Why? How come?”

Thinking it might be an error, Seina was about to try again when suddenly, his mother's face appeared on the monitor.

“Seina, listen carefully. You left home with big dreams, so you don't need to contact us about every little thing. Honestly, business is booming right now, so I don't want you to bother us. Besides, I'm busy, and you can focus on your studies, right? Kiriko-chan keeps me updated on how you're doing. Take care. Just don't cause trouble for others, especially anything that might lead to compensation issues.”

Seina listened to those words in stunned silence, but quickly regained his composure.

“I see. So the family business is going well… Fine then. Oh! Since I'm here, I'll complain to Tenchi-senpai's grandfather…” Seina started to say, but then realized he didn't know the shrine office's phone number.

“Ah, but… right! I can just ask Tenchi-senpai. He knows the number for his grandfather’s office.”

Relieved, Seina entered the Masaki family's phone number. And a few seconds later, what appeared on the monitor was…

“Meow!”

“Um… this girl… I'm pretty sure Sasami-chan always brought her along… Ryo-Ohki-chan, right?”

“Meow!” Ryo-Ohki answered happily, wagging her tail.

“Hahaha, it's been about a month, hasn't it? Hey, is anyone else home? ……But I guess asking that won't help.”

“Meow!”

Ryo-Ohki went off-screen, and just as Seina thought he heard Ryo-Ohki's cry from afar, “What's wrong, Ryo-chan? Huh? Is someone on the phone?” A voice approached.

(Did she understand what I said?)

To Seina's slight surprise, Sasami appeared in front of the monitor.

“Um, who is this… Oh, Seina-nii-chan?”

“Good evening, Sasami-chan. I'm sorry to spring this on you suddenly, but is Tenchi-senpai here?”

“I'm sorry, but I was told he can't talk to Seina-nii-chan for a while.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I'm sorry, but Tenchi-nii-chan is finally relieved to be free too.” Sasami said awkwardly, avoiding Seina's gaze.

“Released? …Um… So, Tenchi-senpai's grandfather's…”

“I'm sorry! That's not allowed either.”

Only then did Seina grasp the meaning behind Sasami's apology.

“So, you won't accept complaints related to Airi-san… Huh?”

Seina sighed deeply, lifted his face, and looked at Sasami again. But Sasami was no longer on the monitor. Just like before, only Ryo-Ohki sat there, wagging her tail.

“…Hey, Ryo-Ohki-chan, can you listen to my complaints for a bit?”

“Meow.”

“Thanks… well…”

Seina began telling Ryo-Ohki, who was happily wagging her tail, about his grievances with Airi.

The End

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This time, Miki, who raised an ominous flag, exited alongside Ringo. However, Miki left behind one crucial message. In the next volume, the setting shifts from Amane’s residence to the boys' dormitory. Hakuren and the four ladies-in-waiting also move to the boys' dormitory under the pretext of guarding Seina. Naturally, Kiriko and the others won't just stand by and let that happen…….

Seina encounters an unexpected person at a place filled with memories of Miki.

And finally, one thing: just as it was this time, not everything Seina is told is necessarily true. So, see you again in the next volume.

Masaki Kajishima